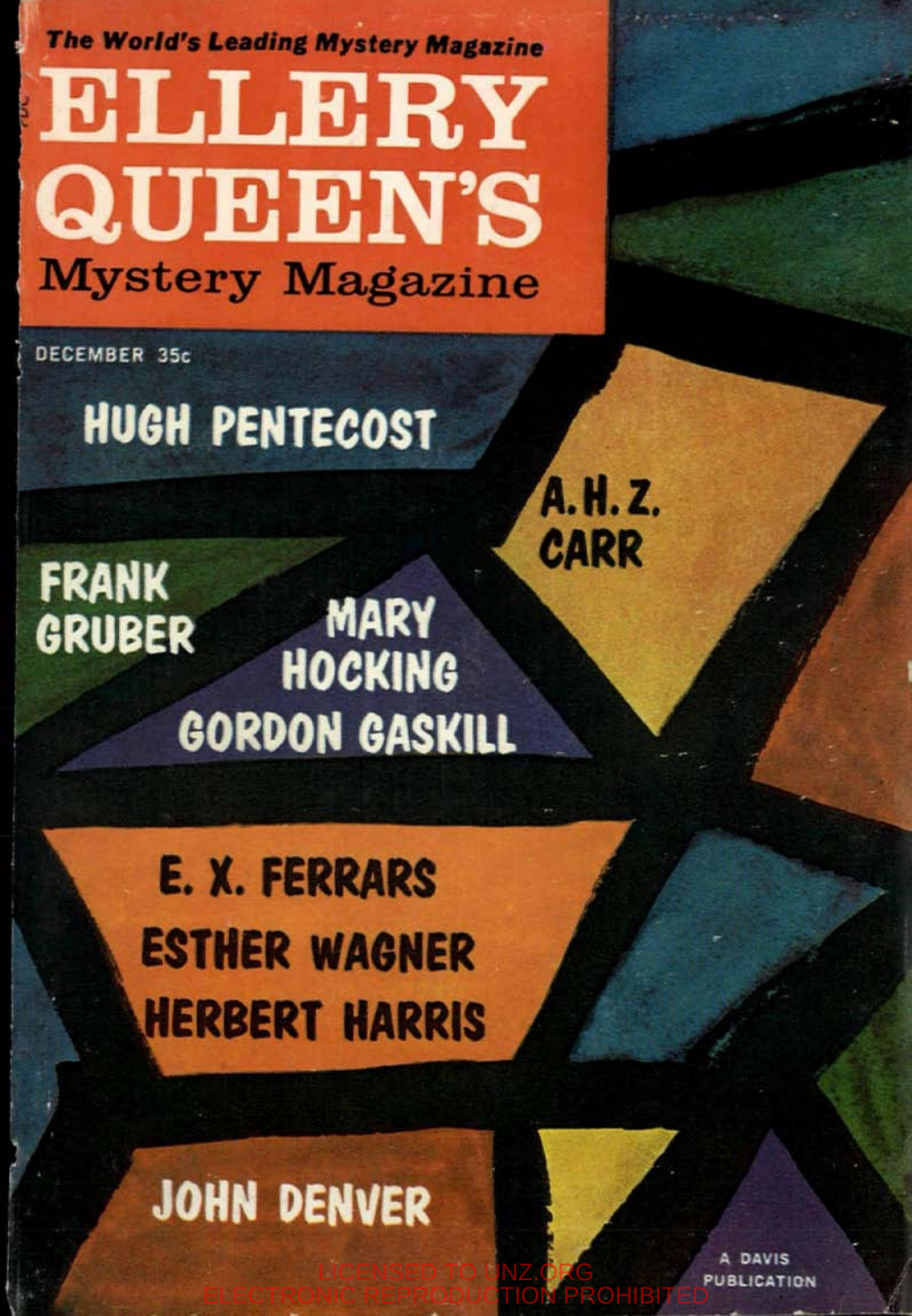

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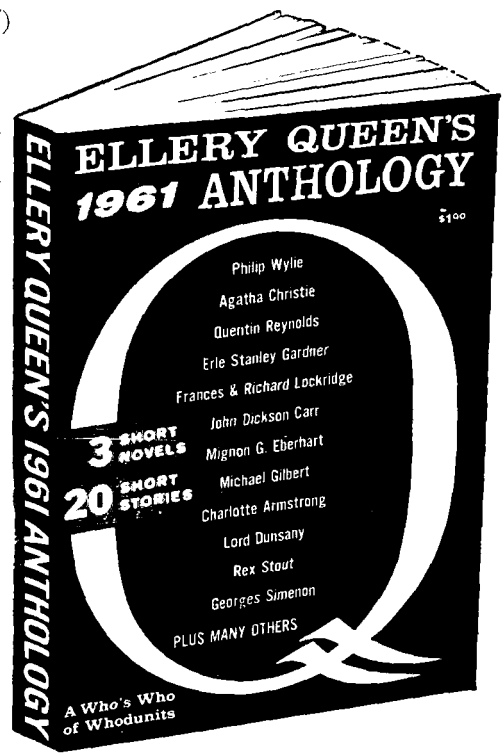

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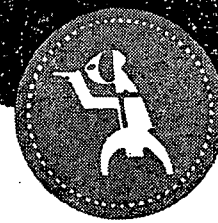

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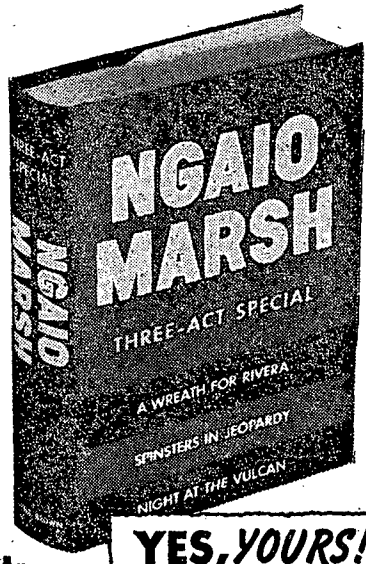

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a new story by

HUGH PENTECOST

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: HUGH PENTECOST

TITLE: *Who Wants To Be a Dead Hero?*

TYPE: Detective-Crime Story

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *It takes a big man to do a really big job, especially against ruthless racketeers. Banty Towers was all of five feet two and 110 pounds, and he had a game leg; but he had in him the seeds of a big man . . .*

BANTY TOWERS LIMPED TOWARD the far opening on the north side of Pier X to where he knew the McNab family was gathered. They couldn't hear his awkward, lurching approach over the noise of the winches and the Hi-Lo machines and the orderly confusion attendant upon the discharge of cargo from the *Orient Princess*. Nor could the McNabs see Banty's approach because the exit to the stringpiece was hidden behind great stacks of green-striped coffee bags from Brazil, waiting for the buyers and their trucks.

Michael "Big Mike" McNab sat on one of the bollards on the stringpiece, holding court. His three sons listened with respect. Terry "Trigger" McNab stood at the edge of the stringpiece looking out at the river, busy with tugboats and lighters and the slow approach of the *Queen Elizabeth* being nudged toward her berth a few blocks north. Oscar "The Ox" McNab, his muscles seeming to bulge out of his work clothes, leaned against the siding of the pier, a cigarette dangling from his lips. Louis "The Lawyer" McNab, squatted at his father's feet like a Hindu idol smiling, always smiling—but listening.

From behind the barricade of

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coffee bags Banty Towers could now hear Big Mike's deep, Irish-flavored voice.

"Between now and Friday nothing goes off the pier," Big Mike was saying. "We play it open and aboveboard—till Friday." He chuckled. "We even work!"

"And after Friday?" Trigger asked, without looking at his father.

"We call the piper's tune, any way we like," Big Mike said. "But until then it's Sunday school."

"How do you figure the cut?" The Ox asked.

Big Mike's massive, weatherbeaten face wrinkled in a broad grin. "Fifty Gs," he said. "Ten apiece—counting in Gander."

Behind the pile of coffee bags a helpless rage surged through Banty Towers. There was a big take coming up, and as always he would have to stand by, helpless, useless. He kicked savagely at one of the coffee bags with his crippled foot.

The lawyer, squatting on his haunches, pursed his lips. He whistled—a long high note and then a lower note. "The Bantam," he said softly.

Banty heard the whistle and knew he'd given himself away with that angry kick. He felt the cold sweat break out inside his clothes, and it increased his anger. He was afraid, and the fear made him hate himself. He straightened up, all five feet two and one hundred and ten pounds of him. Once he'd been as quick on his feet as a ballet dancer. That was before a case of artificial flowers had toppled out of a sling and fallen on his foot in the hold of a Mitsui Line freighter. Now the foot dragged and thumped.

Still sweating, Banty moved around the stack of coffee bags to the McNabs. He moistened dry lips.

"You guys aren't supposed to be out here," he said.

Big Mike looked at Banty, smiling, and there was a sham amiability in his voice when he spoke.

"Why, it's the little watchman!" he said in mock surprise.

The Lawyer, squatting at his father's feet, chanted softly:

"Georgie Porgie pudding and pie,
Kissed the girls and made them cry . . ."

Despite the clammy sweat on his body, Banty felt the hot, angry flush rising in his cheeks.

"You'll have to get back off the stringpiece," he said.

"In my day," Big Mike said in a conversational tone, "the watchmen didn't take so much on themselves. Enforce the no-smoking rule was about all."

"You better duck that butt, Oscar," Banty said.

The Ox smiled at Banty, sweetly, and enjoyed an extra deep drag on his cigarette.

Banty moistentd his lips. "I can't take you on single-handed," he

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said. "You know that, Mike. So you're getting a breath of air on the stringpiece. It's against the rules, but no one would help me enforce it. It's against the rules to smoke, but unless the Dock Super saw it with his own eyes he wouldn't back me up. But I'm warning you, Mike. I've been watching and putting the pieces together. I'm warning you!"

Trigger McNab turned slowly, so that his eyes, cold as two newly minted dimes, rested on Banty.

"And what have you put together, little man?" he asked.

"I need to tell you only this," Banty said. "There were cameras missing from that Dutch freighter last week—and cheeses, and more than a case of Holland gin. I'm licensed by the Commission to guard against pilferage. I'm about ready to report where the cameras and the cheeses and the gin got to."

"Who cares about a camera or two, or some cheeses, or a crock or two of Holland gin?" Big Mike asked. "It's been custom and practice for years, Banty. The shipper expects it; the dock super expects it; the stevedore expects it; the insurance company expects it. All the watchmen expect it, Banty—all but you. So who'd listen to you?"

"The Commission!" Banty said, sweating.

"The Commission!" Trigger spat over the edge of the stringpiece. "The working man's friend!"

There was a moment of awful silence. Banty knew he'd struck out with that crack. He'd so desperately wanted to take at least one trick in the game of words.

Then it happened so quickly, and apparently quite by accident. The Lawyer rose abruptly from his squatting position. In doing so he bumped against Banty. Banty, his balance never secure on his gimpy foot, staggered and fell against The Ox. There was a roar of anger.

"Who you think you're pushin'?"

A huge fist, half open, acting like the swipe of a bear cub, knocked Banty spinning. He fell and his head struck heavily against the bollard on which Big Mike was sitting. An explosion of lights went off before Banty's eyes, and the last thought he remembered was: "Here it is! Into the river!"

When Banty opened his eyes, he lay where he had fallen, and there was the salty taste of blood in his mouth and a terrible ache in his head. The McNabs were gone.

Banty struggled to his feet. He felt dizzy and he steadied himself on the bollard—the iron hitching post for ships. Then he turned and limped back into the pier. He'd bitten into his lower lip when The Ox struck him and the blood ran out of the corner of his mouth.

There was a washroom at the head of the pier and he made for it, unsteadily, to repair the damage. He was fifty yards from it when he heard the whistles—the high

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note, followed by the low note. It was the ancient signal running the length of the pier meaning "stranger" or "cop."

As he approached the head, Banty saw young "Muddy" Waters, the Commission investigator, on his daily round. That explained the warning whistle. A college-type young man, Muddy Waters. All the Commission investigators were college-type young men these days. Banty had wondered if they were the kind to deal effectively with the McNabs of the waterfront.

"Hey, what happened to you, Banty?" Waters asked cheerfully.

Banty turned his head and saw Tough Tony Minelli, a Hi-Lo driver, standing by the coke machine. Tough Tony made a gesture with his forefinger—a throat-cutting gesture. "Cop! Choke up! Don't talk!"

Banty looked straight at Waters and the habit of years took over. "I tripped on a pineapple crate and hit my head on the edge of a Hi-Lo machine," he said.

"Tough," Waters said. "I'll be on the pier for half an hour. Take the time to get yourself fixed up."

They might laugh at the college boy behind his back, but they'd work while he was there, and even the McNabs wouldn't risk smoking a cigarette while he was on the pier. You had to be registered with the Commission to work on the waterfront, and the college boy could suspend your registration for any infraction at all. A peace officer he was, too, with the power to arrest. But a watchman like Banty, charged with the security of the pier, had no such authority. He was no more than a licensed stool pigeon—*if* he chose to do his job.

Banty went into the washroom and locked the door behind him. He soaked his handkerchief in cold water and held it to his bruised head. He looked at himself in the cloudy mirror.

"You got no guts!" he snarled at himself. "You got no guts at all! Why didn't you tell Waters what you know, what you heard about Friday?"

It was all very well to shout at himself in the glass, but he knew what having guts meant. The guts to die for something. And the next question was, "Die for what?"

When he'd been a water boy on the piers in the early thirties—nine years old—the answer had been the union. There was the Wagner Act, and new locals were springing up. The union would protect the longshoremen from the racketeers, the murderers, the extortionists, the bribe-givers and the bible-takers, the loan sharks, the bookmakers, the numbers boys. The union would end the kickbacks, end the uncertain employment. The union was something to die for. And then who was suddenly heading the union locals? The same racketeers and murderers and extortionists.

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You still paid to work. You still kept your mouth shut—or else. You still kept your mouth shut and worked when you could. That was the only safe answer.

Now there was the Commission, set up by the two States of New York and New Jersey, to end all this. Longshoremen were registered, watchmen were licensed, the old shape-up was gone, the kickbacks had been pushed undercover, the bribes were handled more adroitly to confuse the Commission auditors. The big shots were in the shadow—but they were there!

The Commission is your friend, the men were told. But if you talked to them—was it safe? Or would you still wind up in the river with your feet in a barrel of cement? Or beaten up in a doorway and left to die? Time would tell, and who wanted to be a dead hero? Until you knew the Commission wouldn't sell you out, you still had to ask, "Die for what?"

Banty's own personal troubles had begun at a church supper. The McNabs were a great church-going family, and it happened that Banty went to the same church. Banty was a reasonably popular young man with overtones of comedy attached to him because of his size. He was a good man in the hold of a ship. If a crate or a box was jammed, Banty could climb over a pile of cargo like a monkey and pry it loose. He was thirty years old at the time of that church supper, and he wasn't a boy inside, although most of them treated him, warmly enough, as if he was still carrying a water bucket like in the old days. But there were hungers in him that hadn't been properly answered because of his size. Women wanted to take him in their laps and muss his hair.

Now at this church supper was a girl Banty had never seen before—a girl with red hair, skillfully applied make-up, and a rounded body that seemed somehow to be constantly writhing. She was no waterfront housewife. No ring on her finger—so she seemed unattached.

After the supper there was a showing of a film taken by Father Cain on a trip to Ireland he'd made the previous summer. To Banty's surprise when the lights were lowered for the film, the red-haired girl sat next to him on a folding chair. She smelled wonderful. All at once Banty's nerves were like supercharged electric wires. The girl's warm hand had moved over to cover his. He didn't dare turn his head. Then he felt her knee against his and he began to tremble all over. Then he heard a soft whisper in his ear.

"Should we go out in the kitchen for a cup of coffee?"

There'd be no one in the kitchen.

Her hand tightened in his and they slipped out of the darkened room, the sound of their movement covered by the hearty voice of Fa-

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ther Cain describing the film as it unwound. And then they were in the kitchen, garish in the light of a single naked bulb.

There were no words. She was suddenly all over him, her arms around him, her lips pressed against his. A great surge of excitement swept through Banty—something he'd never felt before. This was a woman behaving toward him as if he were a man—a real man. His arms closed round her.

And then suddenly she wrenched free of him, screaming. She hit him viciously across the mouth with the back of her hand. Her enameled fingernails tore at his cheek.

"You dirty little—little rooster!" she shouted at him.

Banty staggered away from her, dazed and shaken. And there in the doorway, smiling, always smiling, was Louis The Lawyer.

"This bum make a pass at you, Sis?" he asked softly.

Sis! The sister of Louis and Oscar and Terry McNab—the daughter of Big Mike!

"The dirty little wolf! He tried to paw me!" Miss McNab cried out.

The scream had brought others, and suddenly the room was dark with McNabs. It was The Ox who reached him first. A blow on the side of the head sent Banty reeling into the arms of Trigger. A knee in the groin sent Banty stumbling and screaming with pain into the arms of Big Mike. Like a bean bag they kicked and punched him around the room. Through the red fog of agony Banty heard The Lawyer chanting:

"Georgie Porgie pudding and pie,
Kissed the girls and made them cry . . ."

This beating could have gone on until he was dead of it. But as he was hurled against the wall right by the door, Banty dived through and ran—doubled over with pain, screams of laughter ringing in his ear, and the Lawyer' voice calling after him: "Georgie Porgie ran away!"

It was the next day that disaster overtook Banty. Working in the hold of a Mitsui Line freighter, his body still aching from the McNabs' beating, he wasn't himself. He wasn't thinking about the job. He was thinking about Miss McNab. She'd asked for it, hadn't she? She'd initiated it, hadn't she? And then when he'd been caught at it by The Lawyer she'd been too frightened of her brothers to speak up for Banty.

The crate of artificial flowers from Japan fell on Banty's foot as he thought of Miss McNab.

That was the end of Banty as a longshoreman. He couldn't walk right, even after months in the free ward of the hospital. He might have looked elsewhere for work, but the waterfront was all he knew.

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Somehow, when you've been brought up there, you don't leave it. He applied to the Commission for a license as Port Watchman. Most watchmen were older men, no longer able to do their accustomed work. Banty was in the same boat with them, and the Commission granted his license.

He got a job on Pier Y, and a week later he began to see what was in store for him. The McNabs came to work on that pier. Big Mike was a checker, The Ox was a dock man on the hatch gang, and Trigger was a cooper. Banty saw how the McNabs worked. A crate containing something valuable—say, watches or cameras or silks or liquor—would be swung out of the hold to the dock. Somehow The Ox would manage to drop the crate and break it open. He'd call for a cooper to mend it. The cooper would be Trigger. The checker, on hand to see that all was properly handled, would be Big Mike. Trigger would mend the crate—but not before some of its contents had been deftly removed.

Banty watched this for several days and then he reported what he knew to Waters, the Commission investigator.

It was The Lawyer who opened Banty's eyes to the future. The Lawyer protested to the investigator in outraged tones.

"This little punk tried to attack my sister," he said, apparently shocked at the memory. "My brothers and I—and my father—gave him a good hiding for it. Naturally, he's out to get us—"

"Better keep your personal life out of your job, Banty," Waters had advised.

They would cry "he attacked my sister" and use him forever, Banty saw. He could stop a McNab at the head of the pier with some pilfered object under his coat. The McNab would be suspended from the longshoreman's register for a short time—and Banty would be beaten to a pulp in some back alley by an "unknown assailant"—named McNab.

Banty got a transfer to Pier X. A week later the McNabs were working there, pulling the same old game, the same triple play.

"Cooper!" The Ox's voice would shout, and there would be Trigger with his hammer and his other tolls, and Big Mike to check, and another bit of cargo was gone—to be paid for by the insurance company. These days there was a fourth member of this thieving gang, one Frank Gander, naturally called "Goosie," who seemed to be in on the systematic pilferage . . .

Muddy Waters was waiting outside the washroom when Banty came out.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Yeah. Thanks."

Waters looked at the lump on Banty's forehead and the swollen lower lip. "Pineapple crate, eh?"

"Yeah," Banty said.

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Waters smiled, but his eyes were very bright. "Everything else going okay?"

Banty looked down the crowded tunnel of the pier. A $50,000 haul coming up Friday! If he opened his mouth, the cry wouldn't be "he attacked my sister." There'd be no cry at all—only a quiet killing. Banty echoed his own question: "Die for what?" Let the Commission fight its own battles, he thought.

"Everything okay," Banty said.

About nine o'clock that night Banty lay on the bed in his room at Mrs. O'Loughlin's. His landlady was a widow who supported herself and her three kids by boarding Banty and three other longshoremen and by taking in laundry.

Deep anger had been seething in Banty all day. It had been one thing when he was working in the hold: you could do your job and take your pay; you could even steal a little if you wanted to. Or you could play it straight—so long as you didn't talk. But Banty's foot had made him a watchman, and he was supposed to talk. He was paid to talk. Only he couldn't if he wanted to survive. It made the juices bitter inside him.

The phone in the hall outside Banty's room shrilled loudly. He knew Mrs. O'Loughlin was working in the laundry in the basement, so he went out to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Georgie Porgie Towers, watchman on Pier X?"

The small hairs rose on the back of Banty's neck. He'd know that voice anywhere. The Lawyer!

"Yes."

"If it wasn't for my persuasiveness, Georgie Porgie, you'd be floating down the river just about now. So listen good, sucker. Stay away from the pier and keep your mouth shut till after Friday, or you will be in the river with your feet wrapped in cement."

Banty tried to speak, but the black bile of anger choked him. Making sure, they were. He was being told he couldn't work, couldn't take his pay. He was being told they controlled his right to eat, his right to do his job.

"Got it, Porgie?" the soft sinister voice asked. "We'll be watching you, little man, day and night—just to make sure."

Click! The receiver was hung up at the other end.

Banty turned back toward his room, shaking from head to foot. This was it! He had no choice left. They weren't going to let him decide whether he would or wouldn't do his job. They were deciding that for him. He pounded his fist against the door jamb of his room.

"No! No! *No!*

Keep your mouth shut because you chose to—yes! Keep your mouth shut because it was the ancient code—yes! But keep your mouth shut because some murder-

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ing hoodlums meant to steal the port blind and make you an accomplice in it—*no!*

He went into his room and walked over to the window, his teeth chattering. He didn't want to die. Most of all, he didn't want to wait for it, wondering when and how.

And then he froze, staring across the street. In the doorway of an old warehouse he saw the figure of a man, the red end of a cigarette glowing in the darkness. The pulsing neon sign on Garrity's saloon down the block made the man's hiding place alternately dark and light. The man was Goosie Gander, the McNabs' stocky confederate. They *were* watching him!

Sweat beaded Banty's forehead as he turned away from the window. "All right," he muttered between his chattering teeth. "All *right!*"

He rummaged in the drawer of his bureau until he found a little black notebook. Then he sat down at the table with the notebook and a pad of paper. He began to write with a kind of frenzied haste, referring from time to time to the black book. After he'd covered several sheets of paper he read them over, folded them, and put them in an envelope which he sealed. He wrote the full address in a bold hand.

Mr. Daniel Gebhardt
Chief of the Division of Investigation
Waterfront Commission . . .

He put the letter in his pocket and walked over to the window, humming tunelessly. Gander was still in the warehouse doorway across the street.

Banty looked around the dingy little room. It had been his home for a long time. Not much to leave behind, he thought. He clumped along the narrow hallway to the front door and went out onto the concrete steps. Instantly he saw movement across the street. The red end of a cigarette arched into the gutter.

It was only about ten yards to the mail box on the corner. Gander would have to be a Jessie Owens to reach it before Banty did, game leg and all. He stuck out as fast as his awkward gait would allow. He saw Gander move quickly, but not quickly enough.

Banty reached the mail box, dropped in his report. He let the handle swing back with a metallic clang. Then he turned and walked east, without looking back.

It was only a block to his destination. He walked up the front steps of an old brick house and rang the doorbell. He heard a sharp voice call out behind him.

"Banty!" It was Gander, running toward him.

The door of the house opened and Trigger McNab stood there, his pale eyes narrowed, his right hand in the pocket of his work jacket.

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"Well, well, well," he said softly. Banty, his fists cleanched so tightly they ached, said, "I've just mailed a complete report of all I know to Gebhardt at the Commission—all I know about the past, and what I know about Friday. Now I came to get it over with.

"You damn little fool!" Gander said from behind him. He was breathing hard from running.

"Check?" Trigger asked, looking over the top of Banty's head at Gander.

"He mailed something," Gander said.

Trigger pulled Banty into the house and gave him a push that sent him staggering along a dark hallway into a room where Big Mike and The Ox and The Lawyer sat around a table drinking beer.

"A visitor," Trigger said in a savage voice. "He claims he's mailed a report to Gebhardt—including what he heard us say about Friday."

"I came to get it over with," Banty said to Big Mike. "You'll kill me for this, and there's no point in my waiting!"

The Ox stood up and his chair fell over backward.

"A big hero!" Big Mike said softly.

"Somebody's got to have the guts to fight for the Commission," Banty said. "They're our only chance for a decent life. So I elected myself."

"The Commission!" Trigger exploded. "You crazy jerk! They got their price, just like anyone else."

"Not the Commission!" Banty yelled. "I feel good for about the first time in my life, Mike. Somebody's gotta fight you guys, no matter what!"

"So he wants us to get it over with!" The Ox said. "So let's get it over with!" He took a big step toward Banty and his enormous hand came down on Batny's shoulder, staggering the little man to his knees.

"Hold it!" Gander said sharply. "There may be a way out of this yet. Gebhardt won't get that letter till the first mail—maybe about nine thirty in the morning. If Banty was there at eight o'clock, say, when the office opens, and told Gebhardt it was all a fake—he was just trying to pin something on you guys because he hates you so—"

"Not a chance," Banty said, wiping the sweat out of his eyes with the back of his hand. "You drove me to it, you McNabs, and I'm not backing down."

Gander smiled faintly. "Maybe you will back down by morning, Banty. Maybe, after you think about it all night, you'll decide it's not so sweet and noble to die. Maybe, after you've sweated a little—"

The Ox drew back his hand, an angry grumble in his throat.

"No marks on him," Gander said. "Gebhardt might not believe

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him if he was marked up. Just let him sweat out the night. Living looks better by daylight. He's all screwed up to be a hero now. Maybe by morning—"

"Get him out of here," Big Mike said. "And Banty! You be in Commission office by eight o'clock if you don't want to die slow."

Banty's legs shook under him. The wave of courage was beginning to leave him. "I'll be waiting for you in my room," he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

The Ox threw him out.

Banty walked unsteadily to Garrity's saloon, where he ordered a double shot. Gander, the slick hood! He knew what waiting would mean. He knew Banty would think of changing his mind a thousand times in the next few hours. But he wouldn't. *He wouldn't!*

After the second double shot Banty left Garrity's and headed back toward the room he thought he'd left forever. A car drove past him and then pulled up at the far corner on the opposite side of the street. Banty recognized that car with a surge of relief. It was the blue sedan that Muddy Waters drove on his daily rounds.

Banty quickened his pace. The neon sign showed him Waters behind the wheel, lighting a cigarette. Banty hurried. He'd go to Waters and tell him the whole story before the poison of waiting worked on him.

He was half a block from Waters in his parked car when another figure came around the corner opposite him. Gander! Gander walked straight up to the car and spoke to Waters. The car door opened and Gander got in.

Banty stopped where he was, trying to suck in air.

Gander and Waters!

They sat there in the car, chatting together like old friends. Waters held his lighter for Gander's cigarette. Banty turned toward the wall of the building and buried his face in the crook of his arm. *"They got their price, just like anyone else!"* Trigger had said.

Bitter salty tears ran down Banty's cheeks. He thought he'd found the answer to the question: "Die for what?"—and here was the same rotten disease that had eaten away at the harbor for a hundred years.

After about ten minutes Gander got out of the car. Banty saw Waters give him a friendly pat on the shoulder before he drove away. Gander disappeared around the far corner without seeing Banty.

It was a long night, during which Banty lay on his bed, arms locked behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. At a quarter past seven he got up, doused his face with cold water, brushed his hair, and went out onto the street. Standing quite openly in the warehouse doorway was The Ox. He smiled when he saw Banty, a sly, relieved

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smile. Banty smiled back at him and shrugged, as much as to say, "Gander was right."

Downtown on Park Row, just outside the building that housed the Commission's offices, Banty saw Trigger a few yards away studying the merchandise in a hardware store window. The Trigger turned, looked straight at Banty, and smiled. Banty could feel his amused contempt.

It might be hard to get in to see Gebhardt, he thought. But when he gave his name to the cop on duty in the reception booth, he was waved to an unmarked office at the end of the hall.

Banty opened the door and went in. A white-haired man with a lined, weary face and bright dark eyes sat behind a big desk.

"Mr. Gebhardt?" Banty asked, moistening his lips.

"Yes."

"My name is Banty Towers, sir."

"Hello, Banty, I—"

Banty only half heard, and the words flowed out of him. "I wrote you a letter last night, Mr. Gebhardt, but I don't think you're going to get it. In it I reported the pilferage that's been going on at Pier X, and a big deal that's coming up Friday, engineered by the McNabs and a man named Gander. After I mailed it to you I went to the McNabs and told 'em to do their worst. I was fighting on your side, I told 'em, and I wasn't scared to die in the fight. They laughed at me. They said the Commission had its price like anyone else. I knew it wasn't so—for about ten minutes!"

"Banty, listen—"

"Your man Waters—he's up to here in it! I saw him with my own eyes, friendly and palsy-walsy with Gander. He'll see you don't get the letter. He'll see I get what's coming to me. But you got to know before he gets me, or the McNabs get me—"

"Shut up!" Gebhardt said sharply. He'd been ringing a bell on his desk while Banty was talking. Now the door opened. Two men came in. One of them was Waters. The other was Gander.

Hot tears welled up into Banty's eyes, but he was laughing—a hysterical, high-pitched laugh. "They were right!" he cried. "All of you in it! Even you, Gebhardt. Crooked, lousy, graft-taking—Well, I told the McNabs—get it over with, I told them. I say the same to you, Mr. Crooked Gebhardt—get it over with!" He was breathing hard when he finished.

Gebhardt spoke quietly. "You know this man as Goosie Gander, Banty. His real name is Frank Taylor. He's one of my best undercover men."

Gander, or Taylor, grinned at Banty. "You're a gutsy little guy, Banty," he said. "I didn't think I'd ever get you away from the McNabs last night without their working you over."

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Gebhardt's office began to spin slowly around Banty, but he could hear the Chief Investigator's voice clearly. It was gentle and penetrating.

"We've had to pass by your reports, Banty, had to laugh you off a little because of the big deal coming up Friday. So you'll go back to work on the pier this morning, and you'll let the McNabs know you retracted what you wrote in the letter, and that I believe it and let you off with a reprimand. You'll take the kidding and maybe even a little pushing around. Nothing serious will happen to you, because Taylor here will be watching you every minute. On Friday they'll be discharging cargo from the *Liebestadt*. We know from our contacts abroad there'll be a special case of tweeds from Scotland. It'll get into Oscar McNab's hands because it's specially marked, and he'll drop it like always and yell for a cooper to mend it. It'll be Trigger who'll come, and Big Mike to check. Taylor here will be helping Oscar. There'll be a small package passed from the crate into someone's pocket. You'll see it happen, Banty, and so will Taylor. And then we make the pinch. About a hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of heroin. We hope to find it in Trigger's pocket, because we want him out of the way most of all. But they'll all go up for a long stretch, thanks to your reports confirming Taylor's testimony."

"Heroin!" Banty whispered. "So that was it!"

"A long stretch," Gebhardt said. "After the brush you had with the McNabs yesterday morning they wanted you off the pier till after Friday. They were afraid of your honesty, Banty."

"You knew about that?" Banty asked.

Waters laughed. "Pineapple crate my foot!" he said. He laughed again. "College boys aren't as dumb as they look, Banty." He yawned. "I'm for a little shut-eye, Chief. We watched Banty's place all night, just in case he did what he said and waited there for the McNabs."

Gebhardt looked straight at Banty with those bright black eyes. "This isn't always a gratifying job, Banty. You've got no idea how badly we need people like you on the waterfront—people who believe in us and who will fight for what we stand for. I'm sorry you had to lose your trust in us, even for a night."

It was crazy, but Banty felt the sting of tears in his eyes. "Don't worry about that, Mr. Gebhardt. I feel great," he said. "Just great!"

"Q"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **GORDON GASKILL**

TITLE: ***Yacht for a Coffin***

TYPE: Detective Novelette

DETECTIVE: Bob Henderson

LOCALE: Salicudi Island, off Sicily

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *"We wore masks, and from behind one of the masks a killer was watching us, perhaps even amused, feeling perfectly safe now, realizing that all evidence was lost forever on the bottom of the Mediterranean."*

THE ISLAND WAS VERY NEAR NOW, but we were not yet in its lee, and the Mediterranean was still fairly rough. It was almost midnight, with an overcast sky like black velvet. Looking back, it was a perfect setting for murder.

The southwestern *libeccio* had blown all day. It was a good hard sailing wind, with one reef in, but it was straight in our teeth, too. Under sail, the big 95-foot ketch was fine off the wind, but to windward she was slow and unhandy. Cy Townes, who owned and skippered the *Viking*, had tacked her back and forth for hours; but finally he had been forced to head for Salicudi Island under power.

The diesels were powerful enough to slam the ketch ahead into the wind and sea, but with the steadying effect of the sails gone, the motion was violent, nerve-racking—for the others, anyway. My own nerves, luckily, didn't rack much, and secretly I thought it was fun. So did my fourteen-year-old nephew, Dennis. But looking around the small, shipshape saloon, I decided the others didn't share this feeling. There was enough high tension to run an electric chair.

Wilma Webster Wardell, our hostess and my client, lay back in her chair, eyes closed. By spending a goodly chunk of the late Simeon

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Wardell's fortune in beauty parlors, she usually seemed a smooth ten years younger than her actual forty-eight. But not tonight. She looked drawn and haggard, frustrated, coldly furious.

Beside her, patting her hand now and then consolingly, if a little mechanically, sat Count Charles de Verrier. He'd sold her his luxurious family villa near Cannes shortly after Simeon Wardell died, but somehow he had never really left it, for good, himself. She always introduced him as an old family friend, but I'd heard ruder words for it. The count was about her own age, a handsome man which the polish women usually liked.

From time to time Wilma Wardell opened her eyes wearily, to stare with icy disgust at the two girls on the divan. The girls were stepsisters—both beautiful, both her nieces, both her last blood relatives, and both, to Wilma Wardell's mind, irritating problem children. In all other ways the two were as different as the books they were reading, or pretending to read.

Anita Stapp, a tall, slender blonde, was reading a scholarly book called *Calypso and Other Folk Music of the Caribbean*. She was twenty-eight, and so far she didn't want to marry anybody at all. She had been interested, at various times, in Finnish poetry, in a French painting style called pointillism and, currently, in folk music.

Her stepsister, Julie Locke, was dark, smaller, fine-boned, and sullen. Her book was named *Practical Small-Boat Seamanship*. She was twenty-two. In London last year she had fallen in love with somebody Wilma Wardell had described to me as "a most unsuitable Irishman."

This whole cruise, in fact, had been Wilma Wardell's heavy-handed way of coping with her nieces. Nothing had gone right from the day we left Cannes some three weeks ago. The weather had been bad. Everyone had quarreled about what islands to visit and how long to stay. We'd been nowhere long enough for me to do any real spearfishing, which was why I'd come. And her scheming about her nieces had turned into an almost ludicrous boomerang.

And Wilma Wardell didn't like it. Not at all.

The count patted her hand again, murmuring something, but his eyes strayed to Anita Stapp. The girl caught his glance, smiled back a little anxiously, and then looked down again at her book.

I cast an eye over the two other members of this gay party. Hans Huber, the odd German guest whom nobody had figured out yet, was as pale as anybody else. He gripped his chair arm but he hadn't uttered a word of complaint all day long, as if to out-stoic the effete Allies. Especially our British component, the Honorable Peter Lilles-

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den, whose long, thin face was white and set. He had taken it as a crowning insult to the British Empire that he had been seasick in the afternoon. He'd blamed it on the example set a few minutes before by Merlin, Wilma Wardell's spoiled and sophisticated black cat.

Nobody had been able to persuade Wilma Wardell it was foolish to bring a cat along on a sailboat or her jewels either, for that matter. When the cat became seasick, she'd ordered Julie to put Merlin below-decks in the port bathroom, where the motion was less. This, of course, was purely for Merlin's comfort, not ours.

The silence broke for a moment when the young British mate stuck his head inside the door. His words were for everybody, but his eyes were only for Julie Locke. "It won't be much longer," he announced. "We'll be in the lee of the island soon."

Julie Locke looked up at him, suddenly transformed, smiling, no longer sullen. "When do we drop anchor?" she asked.

"In a few minutes," he said, "after we get inside the reef." Then he caught Wilma Wardell's hostile stare. He blushed quickly and vanished.

"A few minutes!" the future Lord Lillesden said faintly. "Let us hope so."

Wilma Wardell looked at him coldly, as if wondering how Britannia had ever ruled the waves. Perhaps to conceal her own discomfort, she snapped back sarcastically, "Chin up, Peter! This isn't the *Titanic,* you know!" But he lay back, eyes closed.

My nephew nudged me. "Hey, Bob!" he whispered. "How's for going out on deck? I want to see this—coming through the reef!" So did I. Resentful eyes watched us stagger aft and up the steps to the cockpit.

Out of the pitch-black darkness Cy Townes's voice barked angrily, "Close that hatch. You want to blind me?"

"Sorry!" I said, slamming it shut. Coming from the lighted cabin, we could see absolutely nothing. We groped our way to a cockpit seat.

"That you, Henderson?" Cy Townes asked. "Sorry to make like Captain Bligh, but it's hard to see, and this is a pretty tricky entrance. No buoys or lights." In Spanish he shouted some question to Pedro, one of the three Spanish sailors, who was on lookout duty at the bow. Cy seemed tense, and it was contagious.

"You've—you've been here before, haven't you, Skipper?" my nephew asked, trying to reassure himself.

"Sure," Cy said curtly, "but not at night. Daytime's different." His voice was edged with irritation.

I poked Dennis with an elbow. "Shut up. He's got more to do than yak with you now."

Ahead, I saw the great, looming

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outline of Salicudi Island, but I could make out no rocks, no reef. From time to time Cy's shadowy figure bent forward swiftly to glance at the luminous lines of the grid steering compass, to move the wheel slightly, his eyes straining ahead into the darkness.

Suddenly the bow lookout gave a warning yell, high and thin with terror. A second later we struck. Hard. The big ketch reared indignantly, with horrible grinding sounds below as the reef bit into her vitals. She stopped dead, careening far over, changing in a moment from a free and living thing to a stricken mass of wood and metal.

The shock had knocked us to the cockpit flooring. My nephew gasped. "Golly!" I heard Cy Townes's dazed curses. From belowdecks there were screams and running feet. A wave lifted the *Viking,* lurching her farther onto the unseen rocks, twisting her cruelly. The pounding and the grinding below were louder now.

"She's a goner!" Cy grated. He seemed stunned, staring at the useless wheel. Then, collecting himself, he said urgently, "You two go help get the boats over. I'll go see how badly she's holed!" He yanked open the hatch and disappeared. I heard his strong voice yelling, "Take it easy! We'll be all right! We're very near land. Grab a bag and get to the boats! Take it easy—but make it fast, too!"

Already the deck was slanting. Dennis and I groped our way forward. The young British mate, John, was already working in swift silence with the Spaniards, unlashing the two small boats. Below, the electricity went out, and there were more screams.

We heaved the smaller boat over the side, shipping hardly a drop. The larger one, on davits, was tougher, and a wave slopped in water, but not enough to hurt.

Dark figures pushed up from belowdecks, clutching small bags, making for the boats, climbing in. Through the skylight I saw tiny flickerings of light moving down below, and there was excited talking in the darkness, a woman's voice thin with hysteria. Something soft and black jumped by me and into a boat—the cat, Merlin. A tall figure I recognized as Lillesden came to get into a boat, then turned back and vanished. The British mate dashed aft, and suddenly Dennis said, "I'll go get our little suitcase, Bob—the one with the Traveler's Checks." He was gone before I could stop him.

Then Cy Townes's voice, clear, calm with authority: "Take it easy! Take it easy! Everybody out on deck?"

Dennis didn't answer. It was taking him a long time, and the ketch was going down fast. Already wave tops were coming over her seaward, lower side. I started to push down to find him—and just then

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he appeared, waving the little suitcase. "Got it!" he yelled, panting. "It was hard to open the door. Jammed, I guess."

The first, larger boat had already pulled off into the darkness with its load. Cy swept his flashlight over the deck. Except for us, it was empty. We climbed into the smaller dinghy, Cy last, as a captain should. The sea was choppy, but not dangerous. We pulled off a safe distance, then waited, watching the *Viking's* last moments.

She died like a lady, with slow dignity. Her stern seemed caught by the fatal rock, but her bow sank lower, lower . . . The sea was running solidly into her now. As her buoyancy vanished, like breath from a dying body, she was surrendering to the silent downward pull of the great iron keel. Her bow was entirely under now. She seemed to hang for a moment; then her stern rose briefly and followed. Water boiled from the escaping air below—and she vanished.

Cy stared at the spot. "Gone!" he said hoarsely, in a stunned voice. I didn't like to think what he was feeling. She was, I knew, not only his home, but all he had in the world. Compared with the fancy floating-hotel kind of yachts that charterers usually like, she had been old, plain, a little cramped and slow. But she had been stout and solid, too, a gallant thing of beauty, with romance in her white wings that no chrome-plated motor speed yacht could ever match.

Cy was rousing himself with an effort. "Anyway," he said, with a weak attempt to smile, "nobody's hurt or lost. Hardly even wet." He counted us off. "Lillesden, two Hendersons, one sailor, and me. And the rest in the other boat." He flashed his light shoreward. I thought I saw the other boat, but the dark object turned out to be a boot-shaped rock, very near. Then I made out the other dinghy, shoreward of us. Cy hailed it, shouting. "John, are you all right there?"

The mate's British voice came back faintly: "Yes, sir! All right here!"

Relieved, Cy said, "All right. Let's head for shore ourselves."

We pulled only a few hundred yards, across a little bay, and grated on a sandy beach beside the other boat. There were vague figures ashore; I heard Italian voices.

It was Anita Stapp who noticed first. "Aunt Wilma!" she screamed. "Where's Aunt Wilma?"

Cy stared. "We thought she was with *you!*"

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then Cy moved quickly. "Get the women ashore. The rest of us—let's get back there—fast!"

We rowed back and forth over the dark water, still marked by oil and flotsam, where the *Viking* had disappeared. We hunted long and very carefully, calling, calling, calling . . .

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Once I asked, in a low voice, "How deep is it here, Cy?"

"Over a hundred fathoms—six hundred feet," he said bleakly. "The reef goes almost straight down."

Small things floated—kapok cushions, empty bottles, an oil tin, other things. But not Wilma Wardell. Once the flashlight beam glinted on something dark and shining. I recognized Wilma Wardell's beautiful carved Javanese teakwood box. "Cy!" I said tightly. "That's her jewel box!"

He nodded, directed the boat to it, and one of the Spaniards fished it out. It was open and empty. He shrugged and dropped it into the bottom of the dinghy. We went on looking, as long as it was worthwhile. But at last Cy said heavily, grimly, "No use trying any more."

Back on the beach, we found the women already gone. An Italian fisherman led us to the island's only real building, a crude *pensione* where fishermen stayed during the summer months. We carried along what gear we'd brought with us from the *Viking*. Since I had nothing myself, I picked up the teakwood box.

As we walked into the little dining room, lighted by kerosene lamps, the two girls looked up questioningly, with stricken faces. Cy shook his head slowly, sadly. We slumped into the rough chairs, too grim and depressed to talk. The Italian owner and his wife brought us black coffee laced with some strong raw spirit. It revived us a little.

Suddenly Anita Stapp turned to Cy. "It's all your fault!" she shrilled. "We should have waited out at sea, until it was light!"

His jaw tightened, but he said mildly, "Maybe. But everybody wanted to get in to an anchorage. I never had trouble before."

Julie Locke was staring into her coffee. "It was the jewels!" she whispered. "We told her not to bring them, and now—they killed her!" She looked up, white. "She must have gone to her cabin to get them. And somehow the door must have jammed, when the boat turned, and she couldn't get out."

"Yep," Dennis said solemnly, "our door jammed too."

I was shaking my head slowly, but nobody seemed to notice me. Anita said, wonderingly, "But surely she'd have screamed for help, or pounded on the door."

Charles de Verrier sighed. "Who would have heard her? With so much noise and panic—and in the darkness." He went on moodily, "Frankly, I had only one thought—to get what I could from my cabin, and to get out before the ship went down and trapped me."

I caught Julie's eye at last. "No, Julie," I said. "You see, we—we found her jewel box out there—floating—empty." Avoiding her eyes, I picked up the box now for the first close look.

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She took it in her hands. Then she gave a strange little cry. "The lock's broken!" she whispered. "Somebody forced it open!"

And she was obviously right. The teak was splintered, the brass lock tongue badly bent.

Cy, peering over her shoulder, said awkwardly, "Take it easy, Julie."

"Easy!" she flared. "Are you blind? Can't you see what it means? Why would she force it open herself when she had a key? Why bother opening it at all, then? She'd bring the whole box with her." She looked around wildly, "Somebody *else* did it. Took it away from her." She buried her face in her hands, and I barely heard her broken whisper: "And probably killed her, too!"

A whisper only, but enough. The room was suddenly still, frozen. Someone gasped. Then Charles de Verrier was saying gently, "Be calm, Julie. There can be any number of explanations, innocent explanations for—that." He gestured toward the box.

But Anita Stapp was staring. "She's right! What innocent explanations? Give me one—just one!" De Verrier shrugged, saying nothing. She went on, "I don't care what you say about the noise and panic. She'd have screamed like—like an air-raid siren. She'd have pounded on the door or broken it down. You know she would."

I found I was nodding. My mind was whirling, but it was working, too. "And if you're right," I heard myself saying, "it had to be—one of us."

The small room was darker than its shadows now, and we looked at one another with even darker thoughts. "And," I went on, following the nasty logic of it, "whoever did it, whoever took the jewels, probably has them right now. On his person, or in the bags he brought."

Cy stared at me, and said slowly, "Then we all ought to be searched."

After a pause De Verrier laughed shortly. "Why not? But do not forget, my friend, that even if somebody did bring them ashore, there has been time for any of us to hide them. In the sand, under a rock—anywhere!"

I hadn't thought of that. Maybe he was right. Anyway, we made the search as well as we could, and we found no jewels.

We hardly seemed like people anymore. We were masks, and from behind one of the masks a killer was watching us, perhaps even amused, feeling perfectly safe now, realizing that all evidence was lost forever, six hundred feet down, on the bottom of the Mediterranean.

The silence was unbearable. It was broken, finally, almost ludicrously, by Hans Huber. He had said hardly a word during all the talk of murder; now he contributed his thought for the evening. "The passports," he said in his pre-

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cise, schoolbook English. "What shall we do without our passports?"

Since Cy had had to show our passports at every Italian port, he had kept them himself, in a bundle, and had not had time to get them. He began to say, "I'm sure they can be replaced at—"

"Passports" Anita Stapp said bitingly. Her eyes flamed with contempt.

"Leave it," Cy interposed quickly. "We're all worked up. We can talk tomorrow. Right now, we need sleep."

Julie laughed then, half-hysterically. "Sleep! With a murderer loose?"

For me, sleep was a long time coming. On the bed next to mine Dennis went to sleep quickly, in spite of everything. He'd been wide-eyed, stunned. "Golly, Bob, you think it really was murder?" Murder on a TV screen was one thing; murder right here something else. I'd put him off. I wanted to think.

I remembered suddenly how Wilma Wardell had been in love with the Mediterranean, how she'd told me once, "I'll never leave it, Bob!" Well, she wouldn't now. Perhaps she'd have liked it this way, with a yacht for a coffin. And, over her, not six feet of plebeian earth, but six hundred feet of her favorite water.

But murder. Murder and the reef. I listened now to the sea murmuring over it faintly, in the distance. A week or so ago, looking at a nautical chart of Salicudi Island, I'd been eager to see that reef. It had looked perfect for spearfishing. And, in a way, it was spearfishing that had brought me from a downtown Manhattan law factory to a barren island off Sicily.

Our firm handled the Wardell estate, and I handled Wilma Wardell herself, or tried to. Begrudging every day away from the French Riviera, she used to come to New York only for a flying visit every autumn to dazzle the Metropoolitan Opera opening-night crowd with the Wardell jewels, and to talk over business matters. There was never much. She rarely told us what she did with her money, and it was, technically, none of our business.

Her last visit had been a little different. She'd written that Julie Locke had fallen in love with a young Irishman in London. Wilma Wardell had considered him the worst possible choice, although she'd refused even to see him.

She'd asked us to check up on him, hoping we'd find some unpleasant skeletons. A London agency did the check for us, and when she'd swept into my office I'd handed her the report: *Michael Montgomery . . . son of disabled Royal Navy officer from Belfast, pensioned . . . to Oxford on scholarship . . . won a Blue, a First in History . . . now with British Treasury.*

"And probably," I'd said, "with

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a good career ahead of him, unless he commits murder or falls in love with a royal princess." She had not been amused.

She'd flung the report on my desk. "A little dime-a-week fortune-hunting bureaucrat!" she'd stormed. "No family and no money!" Having had neither herself, before marrying Simeon Wardell, she was sensitive about both.

"My nieces!" she'd sighed. "One doesn't want to marry at all, and the other wants to marry the wrong man." Then she'd told me about her plan.

Oddly, for such a woman, Wilma Wardell had liked sailboats, had known a surprising amount about them, and often had chartered one in Cannes. "And I'll do it again this year!" she had told me. "The same yacht, a big, lovely ketch owned by an American. I'll make Julie and Anita come. I'll have a lot of nice people aboard and Oh, you'll see, Bob! At night, on a sailboat, in those wonderful islands . . ." Then she'd looked at me, pityingly. "But of course you don't know how wonderful the Mediterranean is, do you?"

I'd blundered then. "No," I'd said, "but I may be finding out this summer." I loved spearfishing, had graduated from a mere mask and snorkel to an Aqua-lung and was itching to try it out in the Mediterranean. I had a six-week leave coming. My brother, in our Paris embassy, wanted to go off for a month with his wife, alone, and I'd agreed to take their fourteen-year-old son off their hands and take him spearfishing with me.

Too late, I'd realized how Wilma Wardell's thoughts were turning. She had looked me over like a horse she was thinking of buying. I could read the thoughts: *Robert Neville Henderson . . . Princeton . . . excellent law firm . . . satisfactory family . . knows which fork to use for salad.*

"Wonderful!" she'd said. "You must come with us. We'll go to wonderful islands, and you can do all the spearfishing you like."

I'd tried to backpedal, and explained about Dennis. That had shaken her for a little, but not enough. "Bring him along," she'd said firmly. "A fourteen-year-old would love it." Anyway, I couldn't wriggle out, and the firm didn't want me to offend her. The Wardell estate was no bag of ten-cent peanuts.

So I was stuck. And in any other circumstances it would have been laughable to see how wrong Wilma Wardell had been. It had never been very clear whether she'd meant me for Julie or Anita. As things turned out, it didn't matter.

I'd never met either of the girls before and, frankly, I wouldn't have minded being sacrificed to Julie. Not at all. I taught her spearfishing and how to use the Aqua-lung. She had been pleasant, friendly; she'd smiled at me—but so

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does my sister, and in about the same way.

To my chagrin she'd begun flirting with the young British mate. She went rowing with him, got him to teach her about sailboats. Her aunt had been furious, but grimly amused, too. As she'd said to me, sardonically, "At least it shows she's too fickle to be serious about that impossible Irishman in London."

But she'd found nothing amusing in what was happening between Anita and the "old family friend," Charles de Verrier. The count talked smoothly about art, music, painting. He sang to Anita, in a low, soft voice, native songs from Madagascar and the French Congo. She'd taught him, in return, hillbilly songs and cowboy ballads. They seemed to have a lot to talk about, and Wilma Wardell had watched them with narrowed eyes and, I was sure, mounting anger. It was not pleasant to share De Verrier with a much prettier woman, a woman twenty years younger—and her own niece.

I'd often wondered what was going on behind Wilma Wardell's eyes, what plans she was making. Maybe somebody else had wondered, too. Maybe somebody else knew . . .

When I woke up next morning, the sun was already high and hot. I went down to the little dining room and found some of the others there: Julie, Lillesden, Cy, and the British mate, John.

The Italian landlady came in with coffee, and I saw at once the murder story had got around fast. Last night she had been warm and sympathetic. Now she looked suspicious, fearful, hardly daring to come near us.

"She thinks we're going to strangle her any minute," Lillesden said dryly. He held up a cheap black Italian cigarette. "It's more likely we'll choke to death on these. Horrible, but they're all she has."

He was trying to be light, but it didn't come off. For all the blazing sunshine, murder was still a heavy black cloud. Julie looked pale, with dark circles under her eyes; John was uncomfortable. Cy slumped in his chair staring out at the sea.

The Italian woman came back with a pitcher of hot milk. Something black followed at her heels, mewing.

"Merlin!" I said suddenly. I remembered how, last night, the cat had leaped past me into the dinghy, but I'd had other things to think about then. I said, puzzled, "How did he get out?"

Cy stared blankly. "Out of where?"

"He was seasick yesterday afternoon," I explained. "Mrs. Wardell told Julie to put him down in the port bathroom. The motion was easier there."

Julie nodded. "I did, and I locked it, too, with the key. I

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thought the door might swing open, with so much movement." She frowned. "Maybe the porthole was open, and he got out that way."

Cy objected. "Shouldn't have been, not in that weather." His eyes went to John.

"No, sir," John said. "It was dogged down tight. Saw to it myself." He turned to Julie. "Maybe the lock didn't catch well."

"Oh, it caught all right." It was, surprisingly, Lillesden speaking, almost shyly. "You see, at the last minute, I remembered Merlin. I hated to think of an animal caught that way, so I dashed down to let him out. But I couldn't get the door open at all—by the way, there was no key that I saw—and I couldn't hang around forever." He looked down at the cat he hadn't liked so much yesterday. "Still, I'm glad he made it, no matter how." He scratched Merlin's head.

After breakfast I stood in the doorway, seeing Salicudi Island for the first time. It was baking under the hot sun, as barren as I'd expected, except for stunted undergrowth and some dry, heatherlike bushes that grew almost everywhere. It was, I knew, about two miles long, volcanic, and far off the beaten path. Sicily, some fifty sea miles away, was the nearest land, and Palermo the nearest big port.

In winter the island was entirely uninhabited; in summer a few Italian lobstermen used it as a base. Its very remoteness made it good for spearfishing, and our *pensione* had been opened two years before, in an attempt to get some tourist trade.

The sea looked blue and calm, and the bay, only about fifty steps away, was rimmed with a narrow white beach. I saw four brightly painted boats hauled up on the sand, with men around them. Probably the Italian lobstermen.

"No Tahiti, is it?" Cy's voice said behind me. "There's not one darned official here, not even a harbormaster. No telegraph, no wireless, no regular boat connections. These lobstermen say there's a boat comes every week or so, depending on weather, to bring them supplies and take back their lobsters to Palermo, to market. But that boat left yesterday and won't be back for at least six days." He shook his head wearily. "What are we going to do about all this, Bob?" He looked me square in the eyes. "You think it really was murder?"

He seemed yearning to hear a "no," but I couldn't give it to him. "Yes," I said slowly, "I think it was." I went over, out loud now, the reasoning that had kept me awake last night. When I ended, he looked older than ever.

"But who" he asked, dazed. "And why?"

"I don't know," I admitted, "and maybe we'll never find out. Not with her body and all the evidence and clues—if there were any—six hundred feet down."

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He nodded somberly. "Corpus delicti. I've read about that."

"Sort of," I said. "Laymen aren't entirely right when they think no murder can be proved, or no murderer convicted, when the victim's body cannot be produced. But it makes a prosecutor's case a dozen times tougher, almost impossible." I changed the subject. "Where's everybody else?" I asked.

"Oh, here and there," he said vaguely. "That nephew of yours, I think, is over on that point." On the far point enclosing the little bay, I saw light-green patches. "Those are tents," he explained. "Some young French fellows camping there—spearfishermen. Dennis went off that way."

"Probably wants to show off his brand-new French," I said. "I'd better go take him off their necks."

He nodded, as if thinking of something else. "And maybe I'll go have a little talk with Julie—and John," he said oddly, and turned away.

I had noticed a strong sulphurous smell in the air and now, walking slowly down to the beach, I found out why. Steam and vapor came from the earth here and there, and I found one scorched spot too hot to stand on. The volcano's last eruption was in 1903, but I wondered just how extinct it really was.

The rough cone of the volcano reared up behind the *pensione*. I saw a man descending the side of it in giant strides, half walking, half sliding, almost up to his hips in light volcanic ash. Wreck or no wreck, death or no death, Hans Huber seemed determined to see all of Salicudi Island. German tourists have a reputation for thoroughness, and I was beginning to see why.

I walked along the hard sand toward the French tents. But halfway there I heard faint shouting. I looked out to sea and saw an orange pneumatic boat, old war-surplus stuff, heading toward me. Somebody was waving from it, and I made out Dennis. He seemed awfully excited.

Long before the rubber boat grounded on the beach, he was yelling something at me. Finally, incredibly, I understood it. "Bob!" he was shouting. "The boat didn't sink—not all the way down! It caught on something!"

I couldn't believe my ears. Dennis jumped into the shallow water and splashed to shore. "The propeller caught on a rock, or something!" he said in a shaky voice. "Come on! They say it can't hang there long, if the sea gets rough."

Cy had heard the shouting too and came running up. We said hardly a word. We ran for one of the *Viking's* dinghies, and as we rowed out to the reef, Dennis told us what had happened. He had wandered over to the French camp, and they'd taken him with them in the rubber boat to hunt fish around the reef. And they'd seen the *Viking* not far under the surface!

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When we got there, I borrowed a mask, flippers, and snorkel tube from one of the excited Frenchmen and went overboard. I lay on the surface, head down, staring at the *Viking* through water almost as clear as air.

She was a weird, ghostly, incredible sight. Her bow pointed almost straight down into the blue darkness of the great depths. Her masts were almost parallel with the surface, and her keel rested on the gray rock face that slanted down to the invisible sea bottom.

But the rock face, although nearly straight up and down, was not smooth at all. It was full of clefts and crevices, studded with jagged outcroppings. And it was on one of these sharp little outjutting rocks that the *Viking's* starboard propeller had miraculously caught, as she had slid slowly down the rock. The chances were a million to one against it. It couldn't happen—but it had.

How long she could hang there, I didn't know. It was like a man clinging to a cliff face by a single fingernail. It looked as if the tiniest nudge would break her loose and send her down to the bottom, forever.

I estimated she was about thirty feet below the surface—about as far as I like to go with a simple mask. I took a deep lungful of air and went down, pulling hard with my arms, kicking with the flippers. Except for the fish nibbling about curiously, the ketch looked surprisingly normal, as if merely resting. I saw the two smashed planks in her hull, to starboard, where the rocks had killed her. Now they seemed almost minor—but so does a tiny .22 hole in a man's forehead.

I spotted my Aqua-lung where I always kept it, clipped to the outside cabin top under an elastic rope. I'd kept its bottles of compressed air recharged with a little motor-driven portable compressor I'd brought, but that would be ruined now. I remembered, though, that both bottles were full, and an idea began stirring in my head.

I was almost afraid to touch anything, for fear I'd break the *Viking* loose. But, gingerly, I lifted the elastic rope, and the Aqua-lung came away free in my hands. My lungs were yelling for air. I kicked my way back to the surface.

The Frenchmen took the Aqua-lung into the dinghy, looking at it enviously; it was much better than their simple masks.

Cy had an excited gleam in his eyes. He was no underwater man, and hardly ever used even a mask, but he had been looking down too. We began talking plans. Our idea was simple: to tie one end of a rope at the *Viking's* strongest point—her foremast—and the other to a solid rock at the surface. Then, even if the propeller broke loose, as it eventually must, the rope might keep her from going all the way down to the bottom.

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Might, only. The rope might break too. But we figured all her dead weight wouldn't be on the rope. Her wooden hull was still trying to float, but was overcome by the slightly stronger downward pull of the big iron keel. Thus the rope would have to bear only the difference between these two pulls.

It was worth trying, and we started in. It was slow work, and the Spanish sailors weren't much help. Pedro, in particular, kept murmuring in Spanish until Cy told him sharply to shut up. "He's telling me that it's bad luck to try to get back what the sea has taken," Cy told me. "They're like kids."

I had to do nearly all the underwater work myself. I had the only Aqua-lung and was the only man, apparently, who knew how to use one. Dennis was good with it and Julie, a magnificent swimmer, had caught on fast. But this didn't seem the right time for either of them.

Without the Aqua-lung we could never have done it. With face mask alone, I could barely get down to the *Viking* and hover a few seconds—not enough to do any real work. Still, from a deck locker, I salvaged some masks, snorkels, flippers, and a couple of spear guns. I used the mask when I could, to economize on the compressed air. The two bottles gave me only sixty minutes underwater, and some of that I'd need later when we got the *Viking* tied and it would be reasonably safe to go inside her.

Planning was easy, but the actual work took a long, long time. First of all, we had to get the right kind of rope. Cy had always kept an emergency Manila anchor cable coiled on deck, at the bow. I got this up, finally, but it snarled and caught every minute, and I had to go down repeatedly to clear it. It was new and strong, but not quite long enough.

There was plenty more rope somewhere deep inside the *Viking* but I wasn't intending to go inside her until she was tied. The Italian lobstermen offered their own line, but it was thin, brown stuff and we had to triple it before it looked strong enough.

Once Cy held the rope curiously in his hands. "Funny to think," he said wryly, "that this piece of line is worth maybe twenty thousand dollars to me—if it holds."

I looked up. "How do you figure that?"

He shrugged. "Well, it'll take every bit of twenty-five thousand to find another boat anywhere near like her—and you know what she's insured for."

A week or so before he'd asked me some questions about the fine print in his insurance policy, and I'd noticed the face amount: $5,000. Yacht insurance comes high and Cy, like a lot of other yachtsmen, including my father, had taken out a small policy, to cover damage, and had trusted to luck to avoid total loss, which is pretty rare.

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He chuckled, with no real mirth. "I thought I was real smart saving money on premiums. Still, if this rig works, that five thousand will probably pay for salvage, and fixing her up, and then things won't be so bad." He glanced at me apologetically. "Maybe I oughtn't to be talking about money now, but . . ."

It was, unfortunately, a typical Mediterranean summer day—which meant that a breeze sprang up a little before noon and got steadily stronger. By about one o'clock it was so strong that waves were crashing around the reef.

This didn't bother me underwater, for it takes a real gale to cause much movement thirty feet down. But in such weather nobody could work around the surface rocks without being smashed; nor could the little boats stay there, exposed, at anchor.

We had to stop work, with the rope still not tied to the rock, and wait for the sea to calm down. It usually did, in late afternoon. Neither Cy nor I felt much like food, but there was nothing else to do. We went back to the *pensione* for lunch.

It was the gloomiest meal I'd ever eaten. The spaghetti was heavy, with a tasteless sauce; the lobster was fresh, but served with only oil and vinegar. Still, we wouldn't have liked the best food in the world.

For a while I thought nobody would mention either wreck or murder. We steered around it carefully. Then Peter Lillesden said something in swift, fluent Italian to the landlady. She brought him a pad of cheap paper and two pencils.

"Thought I'd sketch a bit," Lillesden said apologetically. "Helps pass the time. Some odd shades of yellow in these rocks. Pity I lost my water colors. Of course they're all down in the—" He broke off, then went on, turning to Cy, "I'm afraid I'm awfully dense, but what good will it do even if you do get the rope tied? She'll still be thirty feet down, and you can't haul her up with the rope, can you?"

Cy chuckled. "No, but if we can hold her there until a salvage boat gets here from Palermo, they can float her with pontoons."

"But how can you get word to Palermo?" John asked.

"That's the sixty-four-thousand-lira question," Cy admitted grimly.

Julie was looking at me. "If you do go inside her, what will you do?" The others looked at me apparently wondering the same thing.

"First of all," I said slowly, "the —body, if I can find it. Then look for the jewels, although . . ." I dropped that. "Then anything else I can find. Evidence maybe."

De Verrier frowned. "You want to bring up her body? But why? What is the good? Why bother her now?"

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"I suppose we must, old man," Lillesden murmured. "The authorities, and all that."

"Authorities." the Frenchman said impatiently. "There are no authorities."

"There will be sometime," I pointed out. "The Italians won't just slide over a thing like this."

Unexpectedly, Anita Stapp said, "Well, if you're down there, could you bring up some of my clothes. I brought all the wrong things with me."

We were all shocked, but only Julie said anything. "Clothes!" she burst out bitterly. "Anita, you—Aunt Wilma's drowned, and all you can think about is your silly clothes."

Her stepsister eyed her ironically. "Oh, Julie," she said, smiling faintly, "I'm just as sorry about it as you are—just exactly as sorry." she added, her tone sarcastic.

Angry sparks glowed in Julie's eyes. "I wasn't the one she was so mad at the day before yesterday, remember." Anita caught her breath sharply, but Julie swept on. "Of course I heard it. Probably half the boat heard it. I never heard her so furious, and I don't blame her. Any woman who would—" She fell suddenly silent, glaring at Charles de Verrier.

It was utterly unlike Julie. A sign, I thought, of the tremendous strain everybody felt. But I didn't like it. Neither did Cy, and he stepped in smoothly to stop it.

"Wait a minute," he said mildly. "Look, this has been hard on everybody. People say things they don't mean. Now let's forget this." He stood up, and I saw an odd, quick glance pass between Julie and him—and John. Then Cy looked at me. "About time we got back to the beach, isn't it?"

"Okay," I agreed, although I knew the wind was as bad as ever and we still couldn't work.

We went ahead to the beach and lay in the sand, waiting, and I was not at all surprised when John and Julie "happened" to come and join us. They looked uneasy.

But it was Cy himself who began talking. "Up to now, Bob," he said self-consciously, "there's been a—well, a kind of secret on the boat. Before, it seemed nothing but a joke, and I agreed to keep it. But now things are too serious. It's bound to come out anyway, and the sooner the better." He pointed to Julie and the young British mate. "They agree with me and—well, maybe they need legal advice, I don't know."

"What in thunder are you talking about?" I demanded, puzzled.

The young mate said, through tight lips, "My name is John, all right, but it's my middle name. The whole name is Michael John Montgomery—"

"Montgomery!" I shouted. "Montgomery the Irishman!"

I began to laugh. Maybe it wasn't the time to laugh, and maybe it

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wasn't real laughter, but the gods must have been laughing too—laughing at Wilma Wardell.

Montgomery said slowly, staring at me. "Irish, yes, from North Ireland—but that's British, of course. Apparently you know who I am."

So I told them how, at Wilma Wardell's request, I'd had him checked. As I finished, Julie said angrily, "You shouldn't have done it! A dirty, underhanded thing!"

"I don't think so," I said mildly. "It's fairly routine and, after all, she was our client." Then I looked at them curiously. "How did you work it?"

It had been ingenious—and surprisingly simple. Julie, of course, had realized immediately what her aunt was up to with the yacht cruise. As soon as she found out which boat it would be, she'd written Montgomery. He'd got leave, come to Cannes, and easily found a job as the *Viking's* "mate"—a courtesy title only, for a yacht that size doesn't legally need a ticketed mate.

Cy had been glad to get him. Handling the big ketch in bad weather with only the three Spaniards was no fun, and Montgomery knew boats from stem to stern, having sailed all his life with his father. Also, he had been willing to take very low wages and, as a crowning asset, he spoke English—a handy thing with so many English-speaking passengers aboard.

At first they'd planned to keep the secret from Cy too. But then, on the spot, they'd realized this was too risky. At any time he might innocently say "Mr. Montgomery," and the game would be up. So they'd told Cy the secret the first day. He'd been worried about playing a trick on his charterer, but they'd been powerful persuaders. They'd made it a sort of love-laughs-at-locksmiths joke, and finally Cy had agreed to keep it quiet.

"It seemed rather a good joke at the time," Montgomery said. "It doesn't seem quite so funny now."

"No," I said slowly. "She didn't have that kind of sense of humor. If she'd ever found out—"

"But she didn't!" Julie said quickly.

I looked at her. "Are you sure she didn't? She might have seen his passport."

She shook her head vehemently. "It was always with Cy," she said, "in that chartroom."

"Which wasn't locked," I reminded her. "She might have gone to look at her own passport, for some reason, and seen his too."

"I'm *sure* she never knew!" Julie said stubbornly. "She wasn't the kind of woman to keep quiet. She'd have blown up. You'd have heard the explosion in Spain!" But a worried line in her forehead showed she wasn't quite sure.

Montgomery took her hand. "Well," he said, "we told you. Come, Julie."

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We watched them walk off slowly along the sand. Cy shook his head. "Maybe I shouldn't have played along," he said, worried. "It seemed all right at the time, but now . . ."

The wind didn't begin to die until late afternoon, and the sea wasn't calm enough to work until nearly dark. We worked like fools, though, and finally got the rope tied to a rock as tightly as possible.

The sun drowned under the horizon a few minutes before Cy said, with satisfaction, "Now if she does break loose, she'll only go down a few feet, until that line catches her." He crossed his fingers. "If it holds."

My nerves were screwed up tight. Underwater work usually had that effect on me. It was fascinating, but it was somehow ominous.

Dinner helped. It was better than lunch. There was spaghetti again, but some good fish, a chicory salad, strong Sicilian wine. Maybe the wine helped dissolve away some of my jitters. Anyway, I remembered I was a lawyer, after all, not a frogman.

Julie and Anita had said hardly a word to each other since their flare-up at lunch. Partly to break the tension between them, partly because it was my job to talk to them anyway, I waited for what seemed the right moment, when no one else was listening, and said, "It's about time, maybe, for a talk —to both of you. But not here."

Julie asked sullenly, "A talk about what?"

"Well," I said, "I was her lawyer —the estate's lawyer. Now I guess I'm your lawyer, unless you fire me."

Neither smiled. But neither argued, either, and they followed me outside.

We walked out to the beach and leaned against one of the lobster boats. There was no sound but the murmuring of the distant reef. It was hard to begin, but I blundered on in: "I knew that some day I'd probably be having this kind of talk with you two, but I never thought it would be like this. Still, as you know, I drew up her will, and I believe she told you roughly what it says."

No answer. Anita bent down slowly to pick up a handful of pebbles. In the starlight Julie's face was shadowed, unreadable.

"Briefly," I went on, "you share alike, fifty-fifty, in the residual estate. The inheritance taxes will be heavy; there'll be various fees and charges. But even so, after everything, you'll each have about three million dollars."

Anita's blonde hair swirled as she tossed a pebble into the sea. "Residual?" she said. "What's that?"

"After all taxes and charges," I explained, "and after a few specific bequests have been paid. There's nothing big—the usual ones to old servants, a couple of charities, and

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the one leaving the Cannes villa to Charles de Verrier."

They moved sharply, suddenly, both of them. "To him!" Julie said, as if amazed.

"I thought she'd have told you about that," I said carefully. "She felt that it was—well, his ancestral home, more or less, even though she'd paid him a very good price for it. So"—I had to get this just right—"as a token of friendship it goes back to him."

Julie laughed shortly. "Did you know about this, Anita?"

"No," her stepsister said slowly, "and I don't think he knows it, either." Then she added thoughtfully, "At least, he never mentioned it."

There was an uneasy silence. Then Anita asked, "How about the jewels—if you find them tomorrow?"

"They're not mentioned in the will," I said, "so they'll be included in the body of the estate. If you two can agree on a division between you, fine. Otherwise, they'd normally be sold, with the proceeds divided equally between you."

Julie's laugh was brittle. "We don't seem to agree on much, do we?"

And that was that. Neither asked any more questions. They told me to handle all the legal details; so the firm still had the Wardell estate account. Finally Anita flung down her pebbles and walked briskly back to the *pensione*.

Julie watched her go, moodily. Then she turned to me. "I shouldn't have said what I did today about her—about quarreling with Aunt Wilma. It wasn't much, really. She was furious about Charles, of course, but then she was always furious about something."

"Cy was right," I said mildly. "Everybody's pretty jittery. Why don't you tell her, yourself, that you're sorry?"

She shrugged. "I don't know why it is we rub each other the wrong way. We always did, even as children."

Stepsisters often do, I reflected—especially when they're joint heirs. I walked back to the *pensione* with Julie, a little deflated. Of course, I told myself, they've known for a long time they'd inherit. But somehow I'd expected more reaction. Suddenly, overnight, they had become very rich girls. They were young, beautiful, absolutely free now to do whatever they liked with their lives and their millions. And they seemed completely unimpressed.

I felt suddenly tired. Excitement, tension, work had kept me going during the day, but finally my hours in the water caught up with me. I went to my room and lighted a candle. Dennis wasn't in yet; he was probably with the French campers again.

My Aqua-lung was propped in a corner, and I checked the air bottles carefully. One was empty; the

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other had only twenty-five minutes of air left, a little less than I'd calculated. I'd have to work fast tomorrow.

Somebody tapped lightly on my door, and I said come in. It was Charles de Verrier, his face tight and smooth in the candlelight. He glanced at the Aqua-lung and then said abruptly, "This thing Anita has just told me—it is true? That the will gives the villa back to me again?"

"Of course it's true," I said. "Didn't you know about it?"

"Would I ask you if I knew?" he retorted curtly. Then he smiled. "Sorry. It is such a surprise. Such a generous thought of hers."

Yet he seemed to have mixed feelings about it. I wondered what Anita had said to him. Maybe it hadn't been pleasant. I could imagine her, scornful, suspicious, jealous of the "friendship" that had brought him such a rich legacy.

De Verrier didn't seem to know what to say next. I suggested his French lawyer get in touch with me later to work out the details. He nodded, absent-mindedly and then shook his head wonderingly. "*Bien!* So it is true! A wonderful gesture from a wonderful woman." He shook my hand, said to sleep well, and left.

I slept well indeed. I pinched out the candle flame and was asleep while the acrid tallow fumes still floated up from the wick.

Still, sometime during the night, I came awake, very groggily. I lay dozing, half asleep, my brain like soggy cotton. I thought drowsily I had heard a faint metallic sound. Perhaps Dennis . . . Then I heard his even breathing from the next bed.

I was puzzled. Metallic sound . . . hinge? . . . door latch? The door wasn't locked, and its old-fashioned thumb latch could be worked from either side.

I got up, opened the door gently, and looked out. The corridor was deep in shadows. I thought I saw a faint movement at the far end, near the steps. I was about to go see who it was when I remembered I was stark naked.

I pulled on my trousers and went out again. But if it had really been anybody, I was too late. And maybe it had been somebody opening the wrong door; they all looked alike.

So I went back to bed. And in the morning I found my Aqua-lung was gone.

I got scant sympathy from Dennis. He looked at me as if I were a half-wit. "You mean," he said disgustedly, "that you saw the guy who took it last night, and just watched him walk off with it?"

"How did I know it was gone?" I argued. "There wasn't any light. And how did I know he had it—if he did?"

"*If* he did!" Dennis said scornfully. Then he looked up at me thoughtfully. "Did you see how those French guys—and the Ital-

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ians—looked at that Aqua-lung yesterday? Man, they were drooling!" His face fell. "I hate to think it, though. They've been so darned nice."

I went to break the news to Cy. He seemed to age five years. "That does it," he said sadly.

From the others I got a lot of sympathy, but no help. Nobody had seen anything—or so they all said. Peter Lillesden said, puzzled, "Why would anybody steal it? None of the others know how to use it, do they?"

"It's not hard to learn," I said. "Even Dennis picked it up fast, and Julie."

He nodded slowly. "So," he said, "somebody else may get down there first—and maybe get the jewels, if they're still there."

"Unlikely," I said.

"Maybe," he answered, "but the story's all over the island now—about the jewels, you know. And you can get them only with an Aqua-lung, can't you? *Ergo!*"

I thought it over. "*Ergo* indeed," I said unwillingly.

All I had left now was a simple mask and breathing tube. With them, I couldn't go inside the *Viking* at all, let alone work in her. I felt let down, restless. I walked slowly to the dinghy and began to push her off. At least, I could see if the *Viking* was still all right.

Somebody shouted at me from the slightly higher ground behind the beach. It was Charles de Verrier, and he was yelling something about a boat. I walked up to him, and he pointed excitedly out to sea. "Is she not coming here?"

She was a long way off, but certainly headed this way. She was obviously a yacht, too, yawl-rigged. Others soon saw her too, and we watched eagerly as she drew nearer.

Finally she swung smartly into the little bay, anchoring in the middle. De Verrier and I rowed out to her. She was the *Odette,* out of Marseilles, and she flew the French flag.

She looked smart, well equipped, although considerably smaller than the *Viking*. "Maybe she has a wireless transmitter," I suggested to De Verrier. "Then we could signal Palermo, and get a salvage boat out here fast.

"Or," I said, as another thought struck me. "Maybe she's got an Aqua-lung."

I was wrong about the wireless, but right about the Aqua-lung. And when De Verrier explained things to the owner, he lent it to me without question. Apparently everybody on the island, and every small boat, was out to see the new arrival, and I had quite an audience when I finally went down inside the *Viking* for the first time.

The usual midday wind was beginning to blow up fast, but it wasn't bothersome yet. The small boats hovered directly above the *Viking,* dangling down a couple of light

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lines to haul up anything I found.

I was nervous. I checked over the rope we had tied to the rock. It looked all right, but my heart was pounding like a diesel as I went down.

The ship looked somehow ominous in the greenish light filtering down from the surface. I hesitated a moment in the cockpit, then forced myself below-decks, into the crazy-angled corridor, now pointing almost straight down.

Small fish were nosing inquisitively around their new home. A few darted up to examine the air bubbles from my Aqua-lung and then turned away disappointed.

I swam down to Wilma Wardell's cabin. The door opened easily, even off balance as it was, and it took only one look to see the cabin was empty.

I flippered on into the saloon. There were more fish here, nibbling curiously at various things —but no Wilma Wardell. I turned back. I'd been thinking about the cat, and I headed for the port bathroom, near the engine room.

In a corner, a few steps from the bathroom, I saw something gleaming dully. I dived and picked up Wilma Wardell's key chain, with perhaps a half dozen keys on it and a tiny purse-sized flashlight as a charm.

The bathroom door itself was either locked or jammed. There was no key. I tried to force it open, but afloat in the water I couldn't exert much pressure. I needed something like a crowbar. I swam into the nearby engine room and got the best tool I could find: a husky-sized screwdriver.

Even with this it was hard to get leverage, but finally it worked. The door broke open, the mahogany sidepiece splintering away. It had been locked, all right. I looked inside the bathroom, and felt sick.

Small fish, the length of my hand, fled away from what they had been inspecting. Wilma Wardell floated up at what was now the ceiling, outlined in greenish light that seeped through the porthole.

I didn't like what I had to do, but I couldn't pass the buck. Gently I pulled the body down—and saw the horrible deep wound in her head. I towed the body outside into the corridor. At this angle the companion hatch was almost directly overhead, and the body would probably have floated up and out by itself, if I had let it go free.

But I guided it out carefully, and tied around her one of the dangling ropes. Then I let the body go. It rose by itself, eerily, toward the shimmering surface fifty feet above me. I could see the dinghy keels dancing overhead and I knew the sea was getting rougher.

I decided to look over the bathroom carefully for any evidence. I found something almost immediately—a big wrench, wedged into the tangle of large plumbing pipes.

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I hefted it, examining it as closely as I could in the dim light. There was no blood; probably the sea water would have washed it away, anyway.

I hunted carefully. Except for a couple of drain plates with tiny holes, the floor was absolutely tight. The porthole was screwed down tight too, and the close-fitting door had been locked. No matter how the *Viking* had twisted, nothing could have fallen out.

There were no jewels.

Next, I flippered to Wilma's cabin. There were no jewels there either, but somewhere in her personal effects, her papers, there might be some clue. I wanted to take away everything.

It was slow-motion work, but I got her suitcases open and jammed into them everything I could, except for some clothing that seemed useless. I took a drawerful of sodden papers. I closed the cases and began taking them outside, to be hauled to the surface.

I had only one more suitcase to go, when suddenly the *Viking* went crazy. Through the water, horribly magnified, came the ominous grating sound as the propeller finally broke loose from its precarious hold. The ketch slipped down, twisting, turning.

I dropped the suitcase in panic and tried to fight my way outside.

The pressure was too much. I grabbed the doorjamb and held tight.

If the rope broke—

(continued on page 96)

A Reader-Service Directory—
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FROM THE MEMOIRS OF UNCLE JONAS

THE CASE OF THE LEFT HAND

by E. X. FERRARS

I ONCE TRIED TO EXPLAIN TO JONAS P. Jonas why it would be difficult for me to write his memoirs for him, and to convince him that I was not just being contrary.

"Look, Uncle Jonas," I said, "just compare the cases you were involved in with the stories I write. I know that I bring in a murder now and then, just to keep things going, but I make it happen among nice people usually living in the suburbs —nice, cultivated people with nice comfortable incomes, the sort of people who in real life practically never take to violence."

Uncle Jonas smiled. He wasn't in the least discouraged.

"I remember a man called Rupert Bardell," he said, "who came of a very respectable family living in the suburbs. He went to a good school, got a job in a bank, and then when the war started, he went into the army and came out with a very fine record. But then it didn't take him long to get another kind of record.

"Robbery with violence was his line. But if you'd met him in a pub, or sat next to him in a train, you'd have thought he was a promising young doctor or lawyer or university professor. He'd have fitted into one of your books, my dear, as if you'd dreamed him up for the purpose.

"Well, when he escaped from Dartmoor, his background was a great help to him, naturally. So was the fact that he was a good linguist and when he felt like it, could turn himself into a foreign tourist—passport and all, of course. He wouldn't have been careless about a thing like that.

"I won't go into what brought me into the case, or the way I happened to get the tip that Bardell was staying at a certain pub, getting ready to hop a plane to Ireland that very afternoon. I didn't really believe the tip, because it came from a source that wasn't too reliable, but I knew I'd have to go along, and be quick about it too, as I'd have only an hour or two at the most to make up my mind whether the man at the pub—if there really was one—was Bardell. And that wasn't going to be easy.

"There was only one clue I had to go on for certain, and that was that he had a partially paralyzed left hand. He'd had it smashed up in the gunfight that got him his last sentence. You'd think that would have made it easy, wouldn't you? Well, just you listen.

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"There were only three people staying in the pub—an American couple and a man who looked like an artist—long hair, you know, a beard, a velveteen jacket, and an open-necked shirt. He was about the right age and build for Bardell, and the beard, of course, was suspicious. But Bardell had always liked a collar and tie and well-pressed trousers. From that point of view the American suited the impersonation better, but I hadn't been told anything of Bardell having a woman along with him.

"This one was a plump little forty-year-old, in a pretty little flowered hat and a good tight girdle. She was very friendly and got into conversation with me right away, telling me about all the cathedrals she and her husband had been seeing. Her husband's only contribution to the conversation was that we could keep the cathedrals.

"He was also the right height and build for Bardell, and the dark glasses he was wearing could have been part of his disguise. But a lot of Americans wear dark glasses in sunny weather, and a lot of them let their wives do all the talking and have had an overabundance of cathedrals. And if I plumped for him and was proved wrong, it would cause one of those mildly regrettable international incidents that we all prefer to avoid.

"Luckily they were all in the bar, having a drink before lunch, and I thought it was going to be easy to see if either man had only partial use of his left hand; but you need only one hand to lift a mug of beer or a martini to your mouth, and that's normally the right hand too.

"So, as I sat there at the bar with them and chatted about cathedrals, I began to think of ways of finding out if the American could use his left hand properly or not.

"The man with the beard gave me my first idea. At the same time he more or less cancelled himself out as a suspect. He put one hand into his pocket and brought out a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches and then he used both hands to strike a match.

"Right away I took out my cigarettes and offered them to the American and his wife. They each took one, then waited for me to light them. I let them wait. But I might have known that wasn't going to work, because as soon as he saw what I was doing, the man brought out a lighter and snapped it on. And for that, of course, he needed only one hand.

"Well, I thought, I'll watch him at lunch. If his wife cuts up his meat for him, I'll know who was Bardell.

"Presently we all went into the dining room. Something happened then that started me suspecting the bearded man again. He looked at the menu, decided he didn't like what he saw, and ordered a sandwich. Then he propped a book up in front of him and when the sandwich came, he absent-mindedly

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picked it up with his right hand and actually stuck his left hand in his pocket. It could have been a very nicely staged little scene. If I hadn't seen him using both hands to strike a match, I'd have decided there and then that he was Bardell.

"But I realized soon that watching the American eat wasn't going to help me either. First he had soup. That's a one-handed job at all times. Then came steak and kidney pie. Now an Englishman attacks that with a knife and fork, but an American goes at it with a fork only, and it's only if he strikes a very stubborn bit of steak that he takes his knife to it. The steak in that pie was fairly manageable, and it all went into the American without having to be cut up. Then came crême caramel—one-handed again—and he said no to cheese.

"So all I had at that point was that I hadn't actually seen him use his left hand—I did not know he couldn't use it; and by then I'd found out that he and his wife were leaving immediately after lunch for the airport. Did I dare act on the small amount I'd discovered?

"There were just two things left which I thought might settle the matter one way or the other. The Americans' luggage, several big suitcases, was in the hall and their car was at the door. If the man carried the cases out one by one, or let his wife carry them, or if he drove his car one-handed, he'd definitely give himself away.

"So when they left the dining room, I followed and watched them.

"It wasn't any good. He tipped the porter to carry out the luggage, and his wife drove the car off—both perfectly natural things to happen. And there was I, wondering whether to jump in my own car and follow them, or stay behind and keep an eye on the bearded man—or give up and go home.

"Then thinking of the bearded man, it suddenly occurred to me that it might not actually be too difficult to hold a box of matches in a partially paralyzed hand, so I went back to the dining room.

"And there I saw something which settled the whole matter.

"On the Americans' table, beside the place where the man had sat, was a small plate with a half-eaten roll on it—*and it was on the right-hand side*. That was something that I hadn't noticed while I was watching him eating.

"He'd moved that plate over from the left hand to the right, which is something that neither an American nor an Englishman would have done unless there'd been a very good reason for it.

"We got him at the airport. And when he started shooting, everyone was very much taken aback, because he'd seemed a nice quiet, courteous man whom you'd have taken for a doctor or a lawyer or a university professor—in fact, just the kind to interest you, my dear, for one of your stories."

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**A. H. Z. CARR**
TITLE:	***A Handful of Dust***
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*An absorbing character study—of an intelligent and sensitive man who took a look at his life and didn't like what he saw . . . the story of a failure.*

WHEN AWARENESS CAME TO Aveyard, he was lying supine on the floor, while Mitchell systematically compressed and released his rib cage, forcing air into his gasping lungs. Mitch's voice was saying, as if from a long distance, "Thank God."

A shuddering wave of relief swept through Aveyard as his blood coursed freely again. Then almost at once his brain was in possession and memory functioned. With a great effort he sat up, closing his eyes until the dizziness had passed.

When he opened them and saw the overturned chair, the cut rope, the kitchen knife on the dusty floor, and Mitch's plump anxious face peering into his, his first emotion was resentment. A whisper was all that he could manage. "Why couldn't you let me alone?"

"Don't try to talk. Can you make it to the couch?" Mitch said.

Coughing with the effort, holding on to Mitch's shoulder, Aveyard pulled himself up; but his knees felt unhinged and he collapsed on the couch, breathing noisily. Mitch threw a blanket over him and brought him a glass of water. The first swallow made him gag but he tried again and after a moment drank thirstily.

"You all right, Ave? Should I call a doctor?"

"I'm all right," he croaked.

"Try to sleep if you can. Probably the best thing."

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He did not want to sleep but he closed his eyes and lay quietly, listening to the pounding of his heart and thinking of the runaway heartbeat of a frightened chick that he had once held in his hand when he was a boy. He must have dropped off for a few seconds, for he came to with a start. His chest ached where Mitch had tried to make a bellows of it, and he wheezed when he breathed, but he felt extraordinarily clear-minded.

All the excitement was gone out of him now. He thought dispassionately of the moment when he had kicked the chair aside—as if it were someone else who had been involved, as if he had seen it all on the stage. Out of the corners of his eyes he watched Mitch picking things up from the floor like a fat little mother hen.

Mitch turned and saw the open eyes. In a reproachful voice, hushed as though in the presence of the dead, he said, "Ave, I can't get it through my head. I'm still shaking. What happened to you? What did you do it for?"

So you want reasons, Mitch? Falstaff had the right idea. If reasons were as plentiful as blackberries I would give no man a reason upon compulsion.

Mitch said, "You're not—sick or anything?"

Sure, Mitch, you'd understand if I told you I had some incurable disease. But why should I bother to lie to you? And if I told you the truth? If I told you that I took a good look at my life and didn't like what I saw, if I said I was sick of living with total recall of my failures, total knowledge of my weaknesses and total hatred of everybody including myself? Do I have to explain myself to you, you interfering fool? Am I supposed to feel grateful because you prevented me from getting rid, once and for all, of the mess of unsure terrors and spasmodic bravado that people call a soul? Aloud, to fill the silence, he muttered, "Sick or sullen, rich or poor, what's the difference?"

Shaking his head, pursing his lips, Mitch said, "You mean it was money, Ave?" He took Aveyard's silence for assent. "Why, Ave, you ought to know better than that. Money isn't that important. A man may be broke, but if you try you can always find some way of tiding yourself over a bad spot."

Aveyard was tempted to say, "Not much tide these days, Cap'n"—just to see Mitch's blank expression. He was tempted to say, "Been reading those inspirational books again, Mitch?" He was tempted to mention how much he had once earned as an advertising copy-writer, but he realized that Mitch wouldn't believe him, or if he did, would feel pity for his come-down. Anyway, it was too long ago to be worth remembering, that brief day of affluence. He said nothing.

"Listen," said Mitch earnestly, "if a few bucks would help—"

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Aveyard cocked a derisive eyebrow. *Sure, a man can always borrow from a friend, if he has a friend, and here you are, Mitch, my best friend, my friend of two weeks, my admiring friend of half a dozen front-porch conversations. Those are the friends who are the easiest touches, always. You don't know it, Mitch, but I'm an expert on borrowing. When it comes to managed currency, Lord Keynes could have taken lessons from me. I have also been known to borrow other men's wives and other men's ideas. As to time, I have borrowed years of that. I've been living on it, with a head full of quotations and a woman who wasn't mine, and damn you for bringing me back into the world of time!*

Mitch's amiable muffin-face was full of concern as Aveyard let out a sudden short laugh at a thought that came into his mind. "I'm a kind of Tomlinson," he said.

"Who?"

"A dead man in a poem. He couldn't get into heaven or hell, so he had to go back to earth. Kipling." With an effort, but also with the pleasure which he always took in his virtuosity, he recited hoarsely:

"Once I ha' laughed at the power
of Love and twice at the grip
of the Grave,
And thrice I ha' patted my God
on the head that men might
call me brave."

"Gosh," Mitch said doubtfully.

It was one thing, Aveyard thought, to be rejected as Tomlinson was by Lucifer and St. Peter—but to be made to live again by a Mitch, by a pest who didn't have the sense to leave dead enough alone . . . Aveyard found a cigarette in his pocket and lighted it with a hand not much less steady than usual. The smoke made him cough. The things he had most regretted leaving behind were liquor and cigarettes.

"Ave, if you don't mind telling me, what was it like?"

For an instant Aveyard failed to understand. When he did his chest hurt with suppressed laughter. "You mean—on the other side?"

"I've often wondered. I've read about guys coming back and having seen things."

Aveyard composed his face into solemnity. "Well, I wasn't over there long, Mitch. All I remember seeing was a lot of beautiful naked girls dancing to a jazz version of *Lead, Kindly Light.*"

"You're kidding."

"I wouldn't kid about a thing like that, would I?"

"I guess you don't want to talk about it."

"That's all right, Mitch. Anything else you want to know? Like me to describe those girls for you?"

Mitch looked a little sheepish. "You know, Ave, I was saying to Helen, you ought to have a wife, a man like you, still in his prime."

"Why, thank you, Mitch." *I took*

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a comprehensive look at your Helen when I first got here, Mitch my boy, but she's not my type. Too fat, Mitch—you and she both are too fat. She must be a greasy cook. You can keep her, Mitch.

"Greatest thing in the world, having a wife you really love. Ever been married, Ave?"

"Once," Mitch waited, and Aveyard added impatiently, "In my youth. Divorced."

"Too bad," said Mitch. "Any kids?"

"A boy."

"How old is he?"

Damn you for a fat, inquisitive wife-lover, thought Aveyard; but automatically he calculated that when he had last seen Steve the kid had been eight. *Twelve years ago—he would be twenty now. Probably in the army. Or in jail. Whatever good blood there had been in the family—and there had been some once—must have curdled by the time it reached the old man, and himself and Steve.* With an effort he said, "How old, Mitch? Let me see—I begat him when I was fourteen years old—that would make him nearly forty. But he's very tiny for his age—his mother was a midget."

After a brief hesitation Mitch grinned. "Always kidding," he said, with a sympathetic smile. "You know, I'd certainly like to have a son. Daughters aren't the same."

"So I understand, Mitch."

"Still, I'm not complaining. Just having kids—it's a great thing."

Sure, a great thing, paternity. Nature's trap for young bachelors. Ave, I'm pregnant. What are we going to do? Don't worry, precious, Ave won't let you down. Ah, that sense of noblesse oblige—or to coin a needed phrase, bourgeois obligé. And the old father-feeling—what had become of that? Must have oozed out somewhere along the line with the rest of the sentimental hogwash. When life has been loose at the seams as long as mine, only the great big emotions, like hatred, remain inside.

"I could use a drink," he said. "Mind getting the bottle, Mitch? In that cupboard."

"Ave, I don't know if it's the right thing for you right now."

"Sure it is. Restorative. All the doctors say so."

"You must have had a lot to drink before—" Mitch finished the sentence by looking at the piece of rope which still hung from the tie-beam that crossed the room overhead.

"Why do you say that?"

"I could smell it on your breath."

"Sure, I had a drink." He did not want to admit to the actual three or four—or five or six. Abstemious Mitch wouldn't understand that he had drunk them ceremoniously, as at his own wake. To a mind like Mitch's, the admission would suggest a frightened man, working up Dutch courage. *Hah!*

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As if three drinks—or six—could make me do anything I hadn't decided to do anyway. One thing we Aveyards do—we could always hold our liquor. If Mitch had ever seen my old man put away his daily quart—or seen him on one of his drunks— "Look," he said, "if it's too much trouble to get the whiskey, don't bother. I'll get it myself."

"No, don't get up." Reluctantly Mitch searched out a bottle, half full. Aveyard had been pleased with himself, leaving that much in the bottle. He had wanted to die with his mind clear—at least, pretty clear.

The cheap whiskey burned his throat and warmed his stomach, which needed warming. "Have one yourself, Mitch."

"No, thanks, not right now. Ave, it's like I was saying. A man needs a woman around the house. Keeps him on the track. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I know that track. But I don't like the roadbed." *If I were to tell the oaf about Maria, that would give him something to chew on.* Aveyard chuckled, and Mitch looked at him in surprise. "Ever hated a woman, Mitch?"

"Well—no, not really, I guess."

"You've missed something. It's a lot more interesting than loving them." Clever little Maria! How neatly she had tricked him into leaving her apartment, so she could pack without his knowing it. The landlord was raising her rent, she said. She had found a little house in the suburbs for them, she said. A change might stimulate him to start writing again, she said. She had moved him out there with some sticks of furniture and then promptly disappeared, leaving only a note: "Go to hell by yourself, Ave. I'm getting married." She hadn't even left him any money—just a house in a bleak low-cost development, with one month's rent paid. After ten years! In his first rage he had thought of tracking her down, choking her—but it was too much trouble. No woman was worth that much trouble.

With a touch of eagerness Mitch said, "You mean it was on account of a woman?"

"Well, no, Mitch, that's not what I mean, but can you think of a better reason?"

Mitch looked confused. Finally he said, "Woman or no woman, nobody's got a right to commit suicide—least of all an educated man like you."

Boy, how educated I am! You will never know, Mitch. Since learning poker and female anatomy at college, I have gone steadily on to solve the mystery of the Pyramids, the secret of the universe: pain rules the world, and what men call pleasure is merely an interlude between the pangs. Would you know what I was talking about, you dumb clod?

"All I can say," Mitch went on, "I'm glad I came when I did."

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A new thought came to Aveyard, and he said suspiciously, "How *did* you happen to drop in just then, Mitch? Not peeking through my windows, were you?"

"Now, Ave, you know I wouldn't do a thing like that. Helen and I thought maybe you'd like to come over and look at TV. There's a new comedy show tonight."

"You mean you just walked in?"

"I could tell you were home—saw your lights on. When you didn't answer the bell I figured you might be taking a nap or in the shower. I tried the knob and the door opened."

So do-gooding Mitch thought he would snoop a little. Now he had snooped himself right into a juicy tidbit of news to spread around, making himself a hero. It had been a mistake ever to get on more than nodding terms with the ass. Irritation was reviving Aveyard's energy: good old adrenalin glands, he thought.

Mitch said, "Maybe it's like what that psychiatrist said on the TV the other night."

"What was that?"

"About the unconscious making us do things we don't realize. Maybe you unconsciously wanted to be saved. That's why you left the door open."

Television, with its little crumbs of sophistication, would end by ruining the innocence of the lower classes. But he had been stupid not to lock the door. He said, "Just my sense of social responsibility, Mitch. Didn't want to cause anybody the trouble of breaking in."

Mitch looked impressed. "That was pretty thoughtful, Ave."

Aveyard was suddenly bored with the one-sided game he was playing. "You don't want to miss that TV program, Mitch."

"Oh, that doesn't come on till later. Speaking of TV—" Mitch settled himself comfortably in an armchair—"the other night we saw *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens, you know. It's a funny thing, but when that character—what's his name? Sidney something—when he said, 'It's a far, far better thing I do,' I thought about you. You look a little like him, too."

"The difference is, I'm not a sentimental slob," said Aveyard.

"I didn't see it that way. I thought he was kind of heroic—letting himself be killed for somebody else. But suicide—that's something else again, Ave. I can't quite figure you doing it on account of money. I know a guy can get tired of being poor sometimes, but that's no reason to kill yourself."

A tickling thought occurred to Aveyard. "I'll tell you, Mitch. Fact is, I was just beating the H-bomb to the punch."

After an instant Mitch said, "You don't mean that."

"Sure I do, Mitch. The rest of history is just going to be fusion, fission, and finish." He chuckled at the phrase. "I decided not to wait."

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"You really think there'll be a war?"

"I've got special sources of information, Mitch. High-level stuff. In three months we won't have to use electric lights at night. We're going to be so radioactive, we'll glow in the dark."

Mitch grinned feebly. "Kidding again," he said. "Anyway, all that war talk. I don't believe it. You ought to take a different approach to life, Ave. Build up your confidence. Now that you're back from the grave, so to speak, maybe things'll look different."

"Well, now, Mitch, that's very encouraging of you."

"You're off to a new start. Why, after an experience like this you could write a book or something."

"You mean, something like, *How It Feels To Live Twice?*"

"Hey, that's a great title," said Mitch.

Aveyard looked at his bookshelves, which provided the one spot of color in the drab, rugless room. Somewhere among the dusty jackets was his own book, his only book, his crippled brainchild, the book that had got itself panned into extinction within weeks of its publication. He could never think of it without remembering the lines that Byron wrote when Keats died after reading that crucifying review of his poems:

'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,
Should let itself be snuffed out by an article.

Well, his own light had flickered at the time. Still, he had lived to play the game from the other side. Of course, he had never had a chance to kill off a Keats, but there had been some years when, if a literary editor wanted a really gruesome review of a first novel, he could count on Aveyard for it.

"Helen and I were saying, if you could write the way you talk, you'd be terrific."

"Thanks." He hated to tell people he was a writer, hated the presumptuous questions, the fatuous remarks: A book writer? What kind of books do you write? Any bestsellers? I've always wanted to write a book. Say, I got a plot for a story you can use if you want . . .

Suddenly he found this vein of thought tedious, and to break it he sat up, bracing himself against the wall. A touch of dizziness kept him silent for a moment. "Mitch," he said seriously, "I know you meant well, but a man has a right to take his own life if he wants to."

"Why, no, he hasn't, Ave. Nobody's got a right to do that. It's against religion. It's even illegal. It's a crime."

"No!" said Aveyard, with elaborate surprise.

"Don't kid about a thing like that, Ave." Mitch hesitated, and then blurted, "You know, I don't understand how you could bear to

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do it with a rope. How come you didn't use a gun?"

"I didn't have a gun."

"If it was me, I would use sleeping pills."

"Then you've thought about it?"

"Oh, sure, thought. Everybody thinks about it one time or another, I guess. But there's a big difference between just thinking about it, when you're depressed, and actually doing it."

"You bet your sweet life there is," said Aveyard. He frowned at the sudden realization that now it was all to do over again.

"Didn't you have any sleeping pills, Ave?"

"Yes, I have some." Accumulated, for just this purpose, over the years, he did not bother to add.

"Then why the rope?"

"Pills are the easy way."

"I don't quite . . ."

"Never mind." *Why try to explain that merely going to sleep proved nothing, involved no real test of fortitude?*

"You mean," said Mitch slowly, "you really wanted to do it the way that hurt most?"

Aveyard found this touch of perceptiveness intolerable in Mitch. "I'm not a masochist—if your TV has taught you what that is. Hell, I don't want to talk about it."

"Ave," said Mitch sympathetically. "I get the feeling you're in some kind of jam you haven't told me. Look, we all get in jams. That doesn't mean you got to do away with yourself. If you've done something wrong, the thing to do is take your medicine."

"You mean, like a man?"

"That's right. As soon as you do that, you feel better."

"You've got something there, Mitch. That's what I always say, too."

"You know, Ave, you and I really have a lot in common. I felt that, first time we met. Of course, you're an educated man, but we think the same way about the big things."

"Yes, indeed, Mitch.

'We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together.'"

"I guess that's it. Lean on your friends when you're in trouble. That's what friends are for."

Aveyard yawned deliberately. "Anything else you'd like to ask before you go, Mitch?"

The hurt look on Mitch's face made Aveyard think for a moment that the man would finally realize that he had been insulted; but the look vanished, and Mitch said briskly, "Ave, it isn't like I'm a buttinsky. I want to help you."

The unconscious insolence of this struck Aveyard as funny, and he almost smiled as he said, "I don't think you can."

Mitch said carefully, "If it's anything political . . ."

"Political?"

"Well, Ave, I don't know if I ought to mention it, but there've

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been some funny rumors going around here."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Gosh, Ave, I hope I haven't put my foot in it. You know how people make things up. I'm not saying it's true. I'm talking about this gossip that maybe you're a Communist."

After an instant of disbelief Aveyard broke into a roar of laughter.

"I told people they were probably crazy," said Mitch with relief. "It's just—well, circumstantial. You can see how they figured. You living out here all alone. It's kind of a family community, after all. And then your being at home so much in the daytime and not visiting around with the rest of us. Not having a TV, either. Not even a telephone."

Aveyard tried to register guilt exposed. "I guess I might as well confess. I wouldn't tell this to anyone but you, Mitch, but I keep in touch with the Kremlin through my wrist-watch radio."

Mitch guffawed. "I told them they were nuts, but you know how these people are. Some of them even said you looked like one."

My lean and hungry style. The gleam in my eye. Now it is guilt by physiognomy. Aveyard shook his head wearily, poured himself another shot of whiskey, and gulped it down.

Pursing his fat lips, Mitch said, "Ave, I'm not just trying to satisfy my curiosity. You'd be a lot happier living here if people knew more about you. What kind of job you've got, for instance. It isn't natural, our not knowing a thing like that."

Ah, now we're getting down to it. The final evidence of my iniquity—I have concealed something from my neighbors. Why, Mitch, I sometimes write book reviews for obscure magazines. Is that right, Ave? Does it pay, Ave? How much do you earn, Ave? Gosh, Ave, that isn't much. Even I earn more than that, Ave, and I'm not an educated man like you are, Ave.

"I am a basket weaver," said Aveyard. "I learned the trade during my years in Sing Sing, and now I'm in training for the Olympic basket-weaving championship. That isn't very funny. I don't think I feel funny. Go home, Mitch. Thanks for everything and go home."

He smothered an explosion of blind rage, as he thought that now he would have to begin again, working himself up to the moment . . . He shuddered. *Perhaps the sleeping pills after all. I've made my point with the rope. No reason why I have to go through that twice.*

He caught up with Mitch's words. "I don't pretend to be a big brain, Ave, but what he said made sense."

"What who said?"

"I've been telling you, the fellow on TV, the psychiatrist. What's

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wrong with most of us, we've got nobody to confess to, he said. It gets all bottled up inside and then first thing you know you do something crazy—like trying to commit suicide. You wouldn't do a thing like that in your right mind, Ave. It goes against nature. That's why I don't want to walk out on you now. I can see you're still mixed up. You might try to do it again."

When there was no reply, Mitch went on, "If you would just get it off your mind, Ave, you'd feel better. Like the fellow says, confession is good for the soul. It would give you the strength to go on living."

"You mean it would give me the weakness to go on living."

"I don't get you."

"Confession, Mitch, is a device for dissipating the nervous force that makes a man dare to meet God or the devil." *And I shall keep my secrets deep within myself, where they can generate again the will to die.*

"I see what you mean," said Mitch.

"The hell you do."

"When you come right down to it, though, if you spill it out to somebody you'll feel better. As far as my knowing is concerned," said Mitch, "you can put that right out of your mind. Nothing you tell me will go any further."

Deliberately selecting his words, Aveyard said, "Why should I confess to you, you interfering sanctimonious fathead?"

That ought to get rid of the clown.

Mitch flushed and said mildly, "That's all right, Ave. Go ahead, call me names if it makes you feel better. I realize you've got to let it out on somebody."

"Mitch, I haven't got anything against you. I just wish you would leave me alone, that's all."

"Ave, take my advice. You've got to do something to help yourself. If you sit and stew it'll only get worse, whatever it is you're brooding about. But if you take some kind of action, you'll find hope and courage to go on."

Aveyard sighed. "Is that positive thinking, Mitch?"

"Kid about it if you like, Ave, but you can get a lot of comfort from a book like that. You got to remember, things are always changing. You never know when you'll get a break. It might be tomorrow. Some people call it luck when that kind of thing happens, but you should think of it as God's will."

God's will—that was always mother's phrase, as she went around trembling for fear of the old man's next explosion. God's will—the slave's classic excuse for kneeling under the lash—or under the fat fist of a malicious drunk. He remembered that fist, the time he had rushed sobbing at the old man and tried to hit him. He must have been about twelve years old then.

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"Mitch, if I want to hear a sermon I'll go to church."

"I wish you would, Ave. You ought to stop tormenting yourself like you do. I always say, when a man is floundering, that's when he needs religion most. You got a Bible here, Ave?"

"No."

"Too bad. There are things in the Bible that could help you. You got to remember, Ave, you're part of the everlasting life, and if you destroy yourself, it's a terrible sin. You don't want to do a thing like that."

There was one more good-sized drink in the bottle. Aveyard poured it into his glass and drank it steadily, interrupting himself to say, "The Japanese think suicide is a noble act, an act of courage."

"Maybe they do, Ave, but in this country everybody knows it's cowardly to kill yourself."

"Don't you believe it. If people weren't cowards, half the human race would bump itself off."

Mitch shook his head. "You'll never convince me of that. Suicide is an evil thing."

In sudden anger Aveyard said, "Shut up." He got to his feet and after a moment found them reasonably steady under him. "Mitch, you'd better go."

The man looked at him stubbornly. "Will you give me your word of honor you won't try to do it again?"

"What business is it of yours?"

"No," said Mitch. "You can't do it, Ave."

"Who are you to tell me what I can't do? It's my life, isn't it?"

Mitch's soft face took on an unexpected grimness. He examined the piece of rope, still hanging from the beam, and the piece on the table, and saw that neither was long enough to serve again. "Ave," he said, "I couldn't live with myself if I went away and let you do what's in your mind. Now I want you to give me those sleeping pills. Otherwise I'm going to go right back home and call the police."

The man meant it. Aveyard could envisage the scene—the police station, the tough, cynical cops, the questions: *What do you do for a living, Aveyard? Why did you move out here? Why did you want to die?* That would be the final indignity.

"Mitch, I don't want you to do that," he said.

"That's what I'm going to do, though, unless you give me those pills." Mitch was enjoying his moment of authority. "You won't want to come home with me now, I realize that, but I'll be back later. All I want is to remove the temptation."

"Cut it out, Mitch. Just be on your way."

"Not without those pills—unless you want the police to come here."

"You're interfering with me. And I don't like it."

"Then it's the police."

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He had his hand on the doorknob when Aveyard moved. He stepped to the table, picked up the kitchen knife which Mitch had used to cut the rope, and without a pause, without a word, plunged it into Mitch's throat.

With a gurgling sound and a look of incredulity, Mitch clutched the open door, holding it for an instant before he slid to the floor. Feeling nothing, Aveyard watched the blood flow and the eyes become glassy. He had often thought of committing murder, and he was delighted by his calmness. No surgeon could have been more objective, more detached. How easy it had been! When he saw the knife in his hand, however, he made a grimace and dropped it next to the body; he did not like knives.

Sic semper Paul Pry. If there had ever been a natural born murderee, it was Mitch. Why did the fat fool have to interfere? Self-ending was hard enough, without having to work up to it twice in one day.

Fastidiously Aveyard skirted the widening crimson pool on the floor. *Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? But Mitch wasn't old, of course.*

Going to a bureau drawer, Aveyard took out a small brown bottle, and brought a glass of water from the kitchen tap. As he put them on the table, he had a feeling of revulsion. He turned and looked contemplatively at the fat thing on the floor. There lay death, esthetically deficient, an inartistic finality, attractive only to maggots.

He smiled at the surprising realization that a new sense of power was surging through him. He had killed—not himself, to be sure—but he had taken a life, and that in itself was a kind of test, a kind of proof. "How do you like it, old man?" he said aloud.

He stood for a minute savoring a fantasy: under an assumed name he became one of the thousands of uncaught murderers—making a new life for himself—succeeding at something—strengthened, forever strengthened by the knowledge that he had killed—that in a showdown he had had the courage to kill.

Then, with a snort of laughter, he sagged into a chair. Who was he kidding? Go on living with the same mind, plus one new terror?

He thought for an instant of letting the public executioner do his job for him, of waiting until the police found Mitch's body. After reflection he shook his head, wincing at the thought of lawyers, newspapers, prisons, courtrooms. *Why did you do it, Aveyard? You trying to make us believe you killed the man because he saved your life? What did he have on you? Come clean, Avelyard.*

At least, if he was going to die, let it be as *homo sapiens,* not as *homo contemptibilis.*

After a while he reached for the

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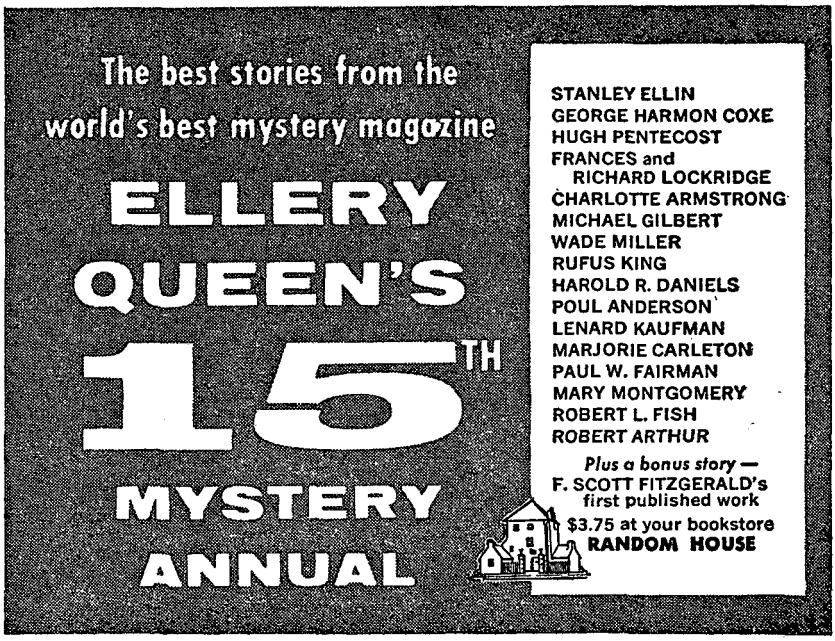
brown bottle and shook a score of yellow capsules out on the table. He put the first one in his mouth, picked up the glass of water, drank and swallowed. The capsule stuck somewhere in his gullet. Breathing heavily, he waited for a few seconds and sipped some more water, before taking the second capsule.

This time he retched, and brought it up. With an enormous effort he quieted the convulsion of his diaphragm, but he knew that if he tried again, he would be violently sick.

Wildly and helplessly, he stared around the room. The body on the floor, the bloody knife, the darkness in the corners, reminded him suddenly of a surrealistic painting he had once seen, a thing of Dali's, and of some lines of T. S. Eliot's:

"And I will show you something
different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you.
I will show you fear in a handful of dust."

A scream rose inside him and he could not let it out.



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **FRANK GRUBER**

TITLE: ***Honesty Is My Motto***

TYPE: Crime Story à la **Black Mask**

LOCALE: Green Meadows, United States

COMMENTS: *The type of crime story that Frank Gruber does best—breezy, brassy, and brisk, told in vernacular by an O. Henryesque "gentle grafter" and bunco artist . . .*

YEAH, IT WAS A PRETTY FAIR MOVIE. It'd been better though if that jail-break scene had been more convincing. What I mean, it wasn't real. What? What do I know about jails and jail breaks? Plenty, mister. Puhlenty.

Yes, sir, you are looking at an escaped convict. I've been in jail and I've made a jail break. And what's more, there's a reward out for me right now in a certain State.

How much reward? Well, you know the reward they offered for Dillinger when he broke jail? They're offering the same amount for me. Twenty-five bucks.

Sure, I'll tell you about it. I don't mind. Gabby Archie Hobbs, that's me. I'm working a burg called Green Meadows, with the old lemon extract deal. One of the swellest propositions I ever handled. A sixteen-ounce bottle of lemon extract for only ninety-nine cents, and with every sale I give absolutely free, no charge an eight-ounce bottle of choice vanilla extract and one of the finest genuine rolled-steel chicken fryers that ever came out of a tin factory.

What I mean, the deal was good for eighteen or twenty bucks gross each and every day provided I worked the rural routes and the whistle stops like Green Meadows. It didn't work so good in the large burgs.

Anyway, there I am working this burg strictly minding my own business like I always do, when this small-town John Law grabs hold of me and without giving me hardly no chance to sound off, drags me

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down before the mayor. You see, the mayor acts as a judge for this burg, too, seeing as how they only have a circuit judge who comes around every couple of months.

The mayor owns the town's leading grocery store and does his mayoring on the side. I'm telling you this so you'll see how the cards was stacked against me. The mayor is a big, horse-faced guy who wear steel-rimmed specs. He looks through the glass windows and scowls at me when John Law tells him the charge.

"Peddlin' without a license." he says, shaking his head. "That's a serious offense in this town. Twenty-five dollars fine."

"What?" I howls, indignant. "You didn't even ask me was I guilty or not. I'm not guilty. I plead not guilty."

"Fifty dollars fine," the mayor says.

My blood comes up to a quick boil. "You can't do that. It's unconstitutional. I demand a jury trial. I'll write to my congressman."

"I'll see that you get plenty of paper and pencils while you're working out the hundred-dollar fine." Hizzoner says sweetly. "And while you're writing, you might also write a piece to the newspapers about how Green Meadows is one city in this State that doesn't allow tramps and peddlers to victimize its citizens by forcing 'em to buy cheap groceries."

Lightning don't have to hit me more'n three or four times for me to catch on. Hizzoner has the leading grocery store in town. He figures I'm competing against him and so he throws the hooks into me.

I'm licked with a set-up like that so I practically keep my mouth shut and let the copper take me off to the hoosegow, said hoosegow being a room in the back of the Green Meadows fire department. There's two double-decker bunks in the joint as they figures they might sometimes have a crime wave and have four prisoners at once. Only now the place appears empty, except for me.

I go into the joint, and John Law locks the door on me.

I sit down on one of the lower bunks and think about my awful predicament. And the more I think about the raw deal I've been handed, the madder I get.

Pretty soon I'm biting my fingernails. Then I sees a couple of spots on the bunk—and they're moving. That finishes me. I jumps to my feet and yells out loud, "They can't put me in jail for that!"

"The devil they can't," says a voice.

I almost swallows my Adam's apple. I'd figured the jail was empty except for me. But now a guy pokes his head out from the top of the double decker on the other side. He's been lying up there all this while, probably sleeping.

He's about the toughest-looking bozo I've seen in a month of Sun-

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days. I seen a face something like his in the Field Museum in Chicago once. It was what they called a Neanderthal Restoration and was supposed to be a guy who lived thirty-forty thousand years ago.

He grins down at me and shows his teeth. "H'ya, pal," he says, "What can't they put you in jail for?"

I tell him and finish with, "A direct seller comes under interstate commerce. That means he's allowed to sell anywhere in the country without local license, hindrance, or annoyance. I'm going to write to the Federal Trade Commission."

"Don't waste your stamps buddy," the big bozo cuts in. "You're in here because the mayor of this town owns a grocery store and he figures you were cutting into his graft, that's why. He's the law, and there's nothin' you can do about it. Me—d'you know why I'm in here?"

Well, just to look at the guy's face, I'd have figured murder at least. But naturally I don't say that to him. So I just guess at something mild: "Bank robbery?"

He chuckles, but somehow the chuckle makes the hair stand on the back of my neck.

"Naw," he says, "it wasn't nothin' like that. I'm rolling along nice and easy in my bus at about forty-five, fifty miles an hour. Then all of a sudden I sees this traffic light in the middle of the road. How the devil was I to know there was a crossroads town here? So the Law happens to be right there, and he flags me down. And here I am, podner."

"Why, they can't do that," I tell him. "They can't put a man in jail just for passin' a red light."

"No, of course not," the big boy comes back. "That's why I'm out in the meadows now, picking daisies."

Well, we spend a half hour or so cussing out the town, the John Law, the mayor, and everything else we can think of. What I mean, we're getting acquainted with each other. The gorilla tells me his name is "Chopper" Hamley.

"They call me Chopper because I'm a handy guy with me dukes," he explains.

"Well, I wish you'd 'a' chopped down this John Law so he wouldn't been around to run me in."

"Aw, he was just doin' his duty." Chopper says. "After all, maybe I forgot to give you the little details of why I'm here. You see, after the Law looks at my license, he finds out where the bus I was drivin' was really registered under the name of Adolph Hinklemeyer."

I gasp. "You mean—you stole the car?"

Chopper looks down at his big fists: "Well, I didn't buy or rent it."

I think of my own bus parked out in front of the mayor's office. A sweet-running jalopy all loaded up with bottles of extracts and a flock of shiny new chicken fryers. I groan "The crooks in this town'll steal all

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of my chicken fryers and extracts."

Chopper clears his throat. "Gabby, you look like a right guy to me. How'd you like to get out of this jail?"

"Fine," I tell him. "But by the time I work off the hundred-dollar fine old Horse-face slapped on me, the chicken fryers will be a pile of rust."

"Uh-huh," says Chopper. "Climb up here, pal, and see why I prefer the upper deck."

I put my foot on the lower bunk and pull myself up beside Chopper. Then I blink. There's a pile of mortar on the bunk. Chopper grins at me.

"This mortar is so old I could have scraped it away with my fingernails. In ten minutes more I'll have a brick out and then I'll just push out the other bricks. Whadaya say, you want to wait until night or you want to get out right away?"

I swallow kind of hard. You see, up to that time I'd never broken out of a jail and naturally, I'm kind of nervous about it. "Maybe we better wait until night."

Chopper agrees. "I'd prefer that myself. I like to take things easy, and if we busted out of here right now, we might have to run too fast."

Well, knowing what I know, I don't feel so bad. I brush off the moving spots from one of the bunks and catch a few hours of shut-eye. Chopper does the same.

Along about dark John Law comes in with a couple bowls of beef stew. He tells me some more good news. "On account of you parked your car too long on Main Street, the mayor has confiscated the hardware and the phony extracts.

I tell him forty or fifty words that I learned from a longshoreman one time. The Law is kind of green about the gills when I finish and is tugging at a horse pistol he's got in a holster along his right leg.

"Mister," he says, "you're just writing out an application to the county hospital. My father and mother had a weddin' certificate hanging in the bedroom when I was born, and I don't take that from no man."

"But you'll take this," says Chopper, and heaves the beef stew at the Law, bowl and all.

After things have quieted down, we're locked in for the night and Chopper goes back to his work. He's using his belt buckle to scratch away the old mortar. It don't take him long to get out the first brick, and after that things go quicker. It's about ten thirty when we get out enough bricks to squeeze through.

The sidewalks of Green Meadows were pulled in at nine o'clock, and the burg is as quiet as a mouse at a convention of cats. Like I said before, the jail is in back of the fire department, but that don't bother us none on account of the fire department is a volunteer one and there ain't no one on regular duty.

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I'm for hitting the back streets and shaking the dust of Green Meadows as quick as I can, but Chopper leads me to a dark spot in an alley and gives me the works.

"You been robbed by these crooks in this town," he tells me. "It's only fair and honest then that you collect for the things they stole from you. Now I got this place cased and—"

"Cased?" I cut in. "Why, you told me you was just driving through when they picked you up for passing a red light."

"Did I say that?" Chopper asks innocentlike. "Well, never mind. How much you figure them pots and pans the mayor stole from you was worth?"

I do some quick figuring. "I had about forty deals in the car. Each deal is worth ninety-nine cents."

"Hm-m-m," says Chopper. "That's about a hundred bucks. All right, you stick with me and I'll cut you in for a hundred."

The Chopper's arithmetic ain't so good, but there's nothing wrong with his logic. Anyway, my jalopy is still worth sixty bucks of any man's money. Mind you, I ain't no crook and I'd never thought of pulling such a thing otherwise, but the town of Green Meadows has robbed me of about a hundred bucks, and just taking back what's rightfully yours ain't robbing.

"What do we do?" I ask the Chopper. "Rob the bank?"

"Naw, they got one of them newfangled steel vaults in the bank that's pretty tough to crack even with the right tools and soup, and I didn't bring none with me this trip. But I hate to go home without making expenses, so I thought we'd look into the mayor's grocery store. He's got a cheese box in there which he ought to keep a few frog skins overnight, and I thought we'd look them over and see if they're worth taking along."

Well, that made a different picture. It was the mayor had robbed me—not only robbed me but humiliated me.

"Lead on, Chopper," I says, enthusiastic.

Well, we look the town over, under, and in between and we don't find no cop or night watchman anywhere. In fact, by the time we finish, there's only one or two lights still on in houses in the burg.

The mayor's grocery store is the biggest building in town—two stories with a false front that makes it look like three stories. It ain't only a grocery store exactly. It's what they call a general store in these hick towns, and you buy anything from crackers to cultivators in it.

We go around in front first and look at the big sign spread all the way across the windows. *Crumholtz's General Store,* the sign says. We go around to the rear where there's a kind of shed, left over from the old days when Crumholtz had a blacksmith back there and did a bit of horseshoeing.

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I sees something back here that makes me yelp. "My car! They run it back here. And look—they didn't take the chicken fryers and lemon extracts after all."

"So what?" snaps Chopper.

"So there ain't no reason for me to rob the place," I reply. "I'll just climb into the jalopy and hightail out of here. And to hell with Mayor Crumholtz."

"To hell with him is right," says Chopper. "But you ain't pulling out just yet. I got you out of that mouse trap, and you owe me a favor. I'm asking you to help me. What's your answer?"

There's pretty near a full moon, and it's shining right on Chopper's face. His mug back there in the jail when he was in a good mood wasn't the kind you'd expect to see at a church social, but right now he's got it all twisted up and it looks something like a cross between the Neanderthal Restoration I told you about earlier and a wolverene who's just had a nice young deer taken away from him.

So naturally when he asks me for my decision, I give it to him pretty pronto. "I was only fooling. Of course I'm going through with you."

He knocks me on the shoulder blades, friendlylike, and after I pick myself up from my knees, we continue on.

The back door of the store is locked, which proves that this small-town propaganda about no locks ever being locked is the bunk. Locks don't bother Chopper none at all though. He just puts his shoulder up against the door a couple of times and the lock busts with hardly no noise at all.

I'd seen the inside of the store that afternoon on account of the mayor has his office in the back of it. There's a couple of long counters down both sides of the store, both of them loaded with cheap merchandise the grocer-mayor has been palming off on the natives. In the back of the store is another counter, and beside the counter a square split up into little cubbyholes with glass doors and combination locks on them, Post office boxes, for it seems that the grocer-mayor is also the postmaster of Green Meadows and has the Post Office in the store.

The Chopper heads right back of this counter without any looking around, proving that he's been in the place before. In back of the post office boxes is the thing Chopper has called the cheese box.

It may be a cheese box to him, but darned if it doesn't look like a mighty powerful safe to me. I figure it weighs a ton and has a door six inches thick. Me, I could no more open that dingus than I could eat a raw oyster.

The Chopper makes no never-minds about the thing though. He rubs his hands together and says happily, "You stay in front of the counter, Gabby, and keep a look-

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out. It'll take me only fifteen or twenty minutes to open this. And say"—his voice suddenly gets a ring to it—"don't figure on lamming on me. 'Cause why? 'Cause look!"

He reaches up to the top of the safe and hauls down a short double-barreled shotgun. He cocks both triggers, then sets the gun carefully against the wall beside the safe.

I shake my head. Chopper has figured out everything too carefully to suit me. "You can count on me, Chopper," I tell him.

I go out in front of the post office counter and sit down on a half-empty sack of coffee beans. I hear Chopper spinning the combination of the safe and I think things over. I don't feel so chipper.

You know, I've been around a bit in my time. I've been things and seen places, but I was brought up in a strict family, and honesty is my motto. Even in business.

You take that lemon extract and chicken fryer deal of mine. I sell it for ninety-nine cents, and it costs me forty-nine cents. I learn one time that the chicken fryer costs the company wholesale seventeen cents and the two bottles of extract bring the net price up to twenty cents. So the company makes twenty-nine cents a deal, which is fair enough.

Anyway, there's only a range of five hundred per cent between manufacturer's cost and buyer's price, which is legitimate. You pay five hundred per cent on lots of things. That's just good business.

But cracking a safe is downright robbery. My conscience bothers me about that. I begin to wish I'd never seen Chopper Hanley. I make a resolution that if I get out of this mess, I'm going to keep a civil tongue in my head hereafter, no matter how unreasonable the John Laws and small-town mayors may be.

Chopper keeps on spinning the combination dial and humming softly to himself. I take a peek over the counter and catch a glimpse of the shotgun standing there and I shake my head. The moon's up higher now and is coming in through a window. It's almost light enough in the store to read a newspaper, should I want to read one, which I didn't.

But I begin looking at the posters that are hung up on the outside of the "Post Office." And all of a sudden I sit up straight.

There's a picture of Chopper Hanley on one of the posters. The picture shows him with his face washed, his hair combed, and his whiskers shaved off, all of which the Chopper ain't right now, but it's him beyond a doubt. The poster says so. It also says:

Five hundred dollars reward will be paid for the arrest and conviction of Percy Hanley, alias "Chopper" Hanley, alias "Monk" Mason, alias "Gorilla" Gordon. Wanted for bank robbery, manslaughter, and jail breaking. Warning to peace officers: This man is dangerous.

There's some more, but I don't

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read it. I can't see my face, but I know if I'd had a mirror, I'd have seen a green man. Yeah, sure I'm scared. Wouldn't you be scared if you suddenly discovered that the hungry man you'd been tossed on a desert isle with was a combination of Jesse James, Frankenstein, and Chief Jojo of the Cannibal Islands?

My heart is playing leapfrog with my tonsils, and then Chopper yelps: "Okay, Gabby—she's open."

What I mean, he's got that safe open already, using only his two hands. I tear myself away from the reward poster and lean over the counter. Chopper lights a match and begins looking around in the safe. He comes out with a tin box and plunks it down on the post office counter.

"This is her," he purrs, as contented as a cat lapping up ninety per cent butter-fat cream.

The tin box is locked, but Chopper bangs the thing a couple of times on the counter and it busts open. Me, I darn near get heart failure. The town is dead, but the noise we're making would wake up people in a graveyard.

I'm all set to hightail it away, but Chopper has to count the money. It's mostly in small bills and takes some time. Finally he finishes the job.

"Five hundred and thirty-two bucks. Not bad."

He makes a thick roll of the money and shoves it into his pants pocket. Then he comes around the counter and hits me on my shoulder again with another of those playful slaps of his.

When I recover my balance, he says, "Oho! They got a picture of me here."

He cocks his head to one side, purses up his lips, and looks at the picture. Then he shakes his head. "I wish they'd use one of my other pictures sometimes. I never did like this one. It doesn't show up the good points in my face."

I swallow hard. "Di-didn't they know this was you when they picked you up, Chopper?"

"Hell, no," Chopper replies. "The John Law and this tank-town mayor wouldn't know the measles if they caught 'em. Me, I wasn't telling 'me. On account of they might have taken me to the county seat right away, where they got a tougher jail to get out of."

Of course I'm on pins and needles to beat it out of the store and away from Green Meadows, but Chopper takes his time. He scouts around the store a while, changes his hat for a new one, picks himself out a new topcoat, and breaks open one of the show cases and helps himself to a carton of cigarettes and a big bag of gumdrops.

Then at last, just when I'm about ready to keel over from nervous tension, he says, "All right, Gabby, let's scram."

At long last we get outside, and then Chopper gets peevish.

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"You mean this pile of junk," he says, pointing at my jalopy, "is our getaway car?"

"It don't look so good," I apologize, "but it runs fine. On a good straight road it'll go up to forty and forty-two miles an hour."

"And every one in ten miles will hear the tinware rattle," complains Chopper. "C'mon, heave all that stuff out. We're going to travel fast, far, and quietly."

"You mean the chicken fryers and the extracts?" I ask. "Why, there's forty-nine dollars and sixty cents worth in there. You wouldn't —"

"The devil I wouldn't," snaps Chopper. "Didn't I say I was going to cut you in on the haul? When we get away from here, I'll slip you fifty bucks."

"You said a hundred," I reminded him.

"That was before I knew there was only five hundred in the cheese box. I might make it sixty if you'll hurry up and throw that junk out."

"No," says a strange voice. "Throw up your hands instead. The both of you."

A shadow comes out from under the shed, and the moonlight shines on something shiny in his hands. It's a scattergun, the twin of the one Chopper had in the store. Only he'd left it inside on account of having both arms full of the stuff he's swiping.

His face looks kind of sick, and he drops the loot on the ground. Then he raises his hands slowly over his head. Mine are already reaching for the stars.

The guy comes a little farther out of the shadows, and I sees then it's the mayor. He recognizes us, too.

"Well, well, and well" he says, shaking his head, "if it ain't my two prisoners. You went and busted out of our jail, huh?"

"No," grouches Chopper. "The governor pardoned us."

"Is that so? Maybe he also pardoned you into breaking into my store. Well, well, now you've got something *really* serious agin' you. Guess I'll have to take you to the county seat for a proper trial. Yeah, I guess you'll be all set for the next ten, fifteen years."

"That's right, your honor," says Chopper. "But maybe we can make a deal. There's a bunch of stuff we took out of your store. Look"

Chopper starts to reach down for some of the stuff he's dropped. The mayor hollers, "Hey" and then the Chopper makes a little jump and throws both of his gorilla arms around me, using me for a shield to take the load of birdshot. I saw a skunk once that was shot at close range with a shotgun, and there wasn't enough meat left in one chunk to feed a sparrow.

I think of that in the half second or so that I'm allowed to think and I makes the most reckless move of my life. At that it was the only thing I could 'a' done. I didn't mean a thing to the mayor except another

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burglar, and he would no more have minded perforating me than shooting a pheasant.

My hands is still high up in the air, you know, when Chopper grabs hold of me. So I bring them down suddenlike and catch hold of Chopper's head with both hands. At the same time I stoop quick and heave on Chopper's head with every bit of gism I got in me. It's a little trick I learned from "Farmer Joe's" Mail Order Course in Wrestling, which I took one time when I was feeling younger than I feel these days. It's what they call a reverse headlock.

This was the first chance I really had to try it, and if it didn't work, I was a goner. Well, I'm here telling you about it, so of course it worked.

Chopper flies over my shoulder, his feet kicking out. The mayor has foolishly taken another step forward to make good and sure he doesn't miss with the scattergun, and what happens but Chopper's feet hits him smack in the face.

The mayor goes down, the scattergun going off like a sixteen-inch railroad gun, the whole load of birdshot going through the windshield of my jalopy and not doing it much good.

Chopper goes down, too. He's kind of surprised and stunned by the fall. I reach into the back of my car and grab the first weapon that comes to my hand a sixteen-ounce bottle of lemon extract.

Chopper's on his hands and knees, growling deep in his throat preparatory to tearing me to pieces. And then I conks him with the bottle. It's a shame to waste all that good lemon extract—but anyway it accomplishes the desired results. Chopper falls down and goes to sleep, side by side with Mayor Crumholtz.

Of course the shotgun has raised the town. Lights are going on in houses, and heads are popping out of windows and hollering, "What's going on there?"

I figure in a couple of minutes even the John Law will be on the scene and somehow I ain't got much hankering to be around then. The mayor might wake up, too, and what Chopper's feet done to his dental work won't make him happy.

I makes a dive for the car, hops in behind the wheel, and grinds down on the starter. The motor catches pretty quick. I start to shift into gear, and then a splinter of glass that I've sat on sticks me and I realize that I've suffered considerable annoyance as well as monetary loss in this tank town. And I makes another of those hair-trigger decisions for which I'm famous.

Leaving the motor running, I hops out, dashes into the store, and jerks down the reward poster about Chopper Hanley. I come out of the store like a bolt of lightning, stick the poster in the mayor's hand, stoop, and fumble over Chopper a

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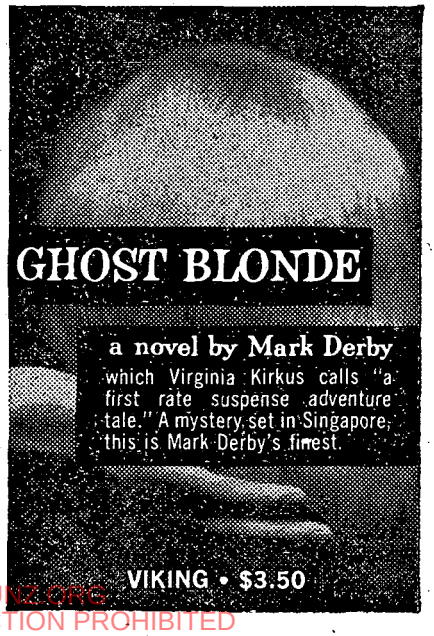
minute, then hop back into the jalopy. Then I got out of town.

What? What'd I do when I fumbled over Chopper that last minute? Hm-m-m. Why, you see there was a reward offered for the Chopper. I was handing him over so wasn't I entitled to the reward?

Of course I was. I just collected it in advance. Yeah, you remember the Chopper lifted five hundred and thirty-two dollars from the mayor's safe. That's what I took.

I don't see how you figure it was dishonest. I read in the newspaper that the mayor collected the hundred dollars reward for the Chopper and me, honest as ever, I mails him the thirty-two bucks over and above the reward money.

●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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Number Thirteen in our Department of "First Stories"—the 13th "first story" in the last ten issues of EQMM—introduces a fresh new talent. David E. Dwyer's "A Mug of Coffee" is an authentic slice of life—a slab of the seamier side of life, realistically told, ironic and disturbing—a story that Jack London would have read with appreciation . . .

Mr. Dwyer is in his forties—occupation now: writer. He was reared on a farm in Indiana, attended the University of Chicago, and very nearly became a doctor—the Great Depression struck him out. He was a First Sergeant in Korea, then spent two years as an instructor and course writer in the Air Force school at Cheyenne, Wyoming. After that—well driller, private detective, prospector, fruit picker—and last summer he lived and worked with a tribe of Blackfoot Indians. His wife is an Englishwoman whom he met in Fairbanks, Alaska. They plan to return to Alaska and apply for homestead rights somewhere in the Arctic Circle . . . Yes, Jack London would have approved of Mr. Dwyer's way of life—as the background for a man who wants most of all to be a writer . . .

A MUG OF COFFEE

by DAVID E. DWYER

LETTERED ACROSS THE UPPER PART of the window was the word E-A-T-S. A faded oblong of cardboard sat beneath it and said *HAM WITH TWO AND HASH BROWNS 80 CENTS.*

The café was a small wooden building standing alone on the roadside, the first place to be seen after reading the sign that welcomed travelers to UTOPIA. POP. 1,913. Inside the café was a squared horseshoe counter with six stools on each of its three sides, and behind the counter, on a narrow ledge, were the pie case and a tarnished coffee urn.

A man paused outside and looked through the window, glinting now in the light of early morning sun. He opened the door and entered, hesitated, then found a stool on the left of the horseshoe. He sat down on the stool and waited.

The waitress, with her back to him, was standing at the other end of the counter talking with the only

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other customer. She was leaning forward, her elbows resting on the counter and her chin in the palms of both hands. Beyond her, the stranger glimpsed a pair of round blue eyes, a small mouth, and a heavy face red with sun and bearing the gloss of perpetual sweat. The waitress shifted her position slightly and the newcomer saw the badge of a Deputy Sheriff pinned to the shirt front.

The waitress had lowered her voice when the new customer came in, and now it was barely more than a whisper. Without changing position again or interrupting her low monologue she detached a hand from under her chin, crooked an arm behind her torso, and scratched nervously under a shoulder blade. She ran her fingers under a strap beneath her dress and loosened it a bit. Engrossed in her words, she left the hand dangling behind her.

The stranger watched the woman's back, visualizing how it would appear without its covering of cloth. It was thin and slightly rounded behind the shoulders. The bare arms were pallid, as though habitually protected from the desert sun. In contrast, the dangling hand was pink and her fingers twitched as they punctuated the words her lips and tongue were forming. Motes of disturbed dust moved aimlessly through the shaft of light in a miniature universe of silent, unplanned chaos.

The stranger fastened his eyes on the coffee urn and the careless stack of mugs beside it. He turned a silver coin between thumb and forefinger.

He flinched and nearly dropped the coin as the deputy suddenly smacked a palm loudly against the counter top and burst into laughter. The waitress straightened and half turned to face the front window—triumphantly, as if to receive the accolade of an invisible audience. Her lips were pursed. The stranger saw now that she was not uncomely, with the sun glinting her hair, and in Utopia any success reached across a world measured only by the width of a single road.

The deputy's laughter gradually subsided into a series of chuckles. "Vi, you're a whiz," he said between the last of the chuckles. "A whiz with a real bang."

"It really happened," said Vi. "Just before closing time last night. Old Les Miller was in here, sitting where you are this very minute. To talk to him you'd think sugar wouldn't melt in his mouth. And when I gave the word to those people just in the same voice like I'm talking to you, I thought old Les would get off his stool and crawl right out that door." Vi was still facing the window, but her eyes were rolled to look down at the deputy.

"I sure like to have seen his face."

"It didn't change any—not a

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smidgen. He was eating a burger and he pretended not to hear what was going on. Want a refill, Mac?"

"Yeah, Vi, might as well. I got nothing to do right now."

"You can always do it here," said Vi, picking up the mug. She carried it to the coffee urn and filled it, standing with her back to the stranger. She returned to the deputy and set the mug in front of him.

The stranger saw the deputy's cap now, lying on the counter with its shield and tall peak facing him and with sides hanging downward in 50-mission crush. It was a rakish, authoritative cap, with all the implications of law and order. He stopped turning the coin, glanced at it, then tapped its edge once, gently against the counter.

"You got a customer," said the deputy, sliding the sugar shaker to a position beside the mug.

"Yeah, excuse me a sec, Mac."

"Sure, Vi." The deputy picked up the shaker and let a stream of sugar pour into the mug, stirring it into the coffee with a spoon. He put the shaker down and began to chuckle again as he continued to move the spoon.

"Yeah?" questioned the waitress, looking down at the stranger.

"Coffee."

"Cream?" She turned and selected a mug from the stack.

"No, just black." He slid the coin across the counter.

She placed the filled mug in front of him, picked up the coin, rang it into the register, and returned with his change. She went back to her place in front of the deputy and again leaned forward to rest her elbows on the counter.

The man held the mug halfway between mouth and counter and looked at the dime and nickel. Reluctantly he raised his head and said, "Lady."

The waitress lifted an elbow and turned her head. "Yeah? You want something else?"

"I gave you a half."

She straightened her body and faced the man. "You did what?"

"I gave you a half. A half dollar."

She looked at him between the pie case and coffee urn. "You gave me a quarter."

"It was a half, lady. I ought to know. It was the last four bits I got on me."

"Look, mister," said the waitress. "I know the difference between a quarter and a half dollar."

"It was just a mistake, lady. Anybody could make it. Especially early in the morning like this." The stranger smiled.

"I don't make mistakes like that any time. You gave me a quarter."

"Couldn't you check your cash drawer?"

"I don't have to check it. I know what you gave me."

"You still owe me a quarter in change. It was a half dollar I gave you."

The waitress breathed noisily

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and looked down at the deputy. "We get all kinds in here," she said. "You should just be around here sometimes, Mac, and see some of the things they try to pull."

Mac nodded. He picked up the mug in both hands and sipped from it.

"They'll come in here and order something and eat nearly most of it and then say it isn't cooked right or something, and they don't want to pay. It's getting so that you have to be on your guard every minute of the day. Now this guy wants a quarter, and tomorrow it'll be somebody who says they gave me a five dollar bill instead of a one. There should be a law!"

"There is a law against it, Vi. You don't have to put up with that kind of stuff." The deputy put the mug down.

"What can I do about it?"

"You need a man around here, Vi."

"Yeah, that's all I need. Like one of those fruit tramps maybe who come stumbling in here all likkered up on sneaky pete, looking for a handout. Nope, there's no men left in this world, Mac. Or very few at least. If you don't believe it, just ask me." She picked up a towel and carefully wiped a few grains of sugar from the vicinity of the deputy's coffee mug. "There's nothing but winos and panhandlers and maybe some dude who drives up and wants to know how he got lost."

"Oh I don't know, Vi. Ole Mac is still around. Will be for a long time to come."

"You can park your boots you know where just anytime you want, Mac."

Mac picked up the spoon and pensively stirred his coffee.

"Lady I don't like to keep bothering you," said the stranger. "But that really was a half dollar I gave you. It was all I got. That's why I know it was a half. I had plans for that forty cents' change."

"Sure you did," replied the waitress, not turning away from the deputy. "You had plans to hoof it into town and get a jug of wine." She swung around to face him. "I know your kind. I see them around here very day. Now I'll tell you what you can do, mister, you can get out of this restaurant—right now."

Mac worked the spoon in the coffee. "You heard the lady. Move."

The man looked down at his coffee, still untouched.

"I said move," repeated the deputy. "It's me saying it now."

"I haven't drunk my coffee yet."

"You—come around here."

"Me—?"

"I'm not talking to your Aunt Suzie. Get around here. I want to take a look at you."

The man stood up and slowly walked around the counter and stood facing the deputy. "I have a right to drink my coffee. I paid for it."

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"Where you from?" The deputy didn't look up from the mug.

"I've been walking almost all night. I'm tired out. I need that coffee. It was just the thought of it that kept me going."

"I asked you a question."

"I'm not exactly from anywhere."

"What are you doing around here?"

"Looking for work."

"Yeah, in a pig's eye. You're looking for trouble. Were you in Saddlerock last night?"

"I walked from there."

"What else did you do?"

"That's all, just walked. What else could I do?"

"I'll tell you what you could do. You could break a window out of a service station and then rob it. That's what you did, isn't it?"

"No."

"Somebody did."

"It wasn't me. I just walked. I wouldn't have the guts to rob a service station."

"Yeah, well, we'll see. You go over there and stand by the window."

"What?"

The deputy lifted his head to look at the stranger for the first time. "You stand there by that window and keep standing there until I get ready to go. Maybe you'd like to wear some cuffs while you wait."

"What about my coffee? I paid for it."

"You'll get coffee for free where you're going. Now get over there." Mac motioned with his head.

The man walked slowly to the window. He looked beyond the letters S-T-A-E at the rising sun, blinding now in its brightness.

"More coffee, Mac?"

"Not right now, Vi. I'll be back later on. You make the best in town. That's one reason I drive out here."

"I hope it's not the only reason."

"What do you think?'"

"Well, like I said about your boots—"

"They come off easy like. They're a size too large. I always buy 'em that way. I got tender feet." He chuckled.

"You think of everything, Mac. I never seen a man like you."

"Well, a man's got to be on his toes in my business, Vi. You make one slip and you've had it. Pretty soon you get to be like a hound dog—you keep sniffing around at everything that moves and even them that don't. Like that character there—I had him pegged the minute he walked in the door. You know how?"

Vi shook her head admiringly.

"Well, he comes in a little too quiet like, and he just sits there and waits, not wanting to attract my attention. If he had busted in here and hollered for service, I wouldn't have thought a thing about him except that he was just a loudmouth. But he just sat there real mousey like with his tail be-

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tween his legs, and that's a sign of guilt if ever I saw one—every time. So I said to myself, now there's a man who's either a fugitive or a criminal, so ole Mac will just play him along like a fish on a line."

"Mac, you're just absolutely wonderful!"

"You miserable oaf."

Startled, Vi and the deputy turned to look at the man, who was now facing them.

"You ignorant peasant, you illiterate, obese, vacuum-skulled moron."

"Of all the crust!" said Vi. "And him just a cheap bum. He should be put away—for life."

"He'll wish he was put away for life in about two minutes," said Mac, rising from the stool and feeling for the handcuffs at his belt.

"You diseased he-goat. You camel-brained—"

"Why, he called you a goat," said Vi.

Breathing hard, Mac whipped out the handcuffs and approached the man.

"What I called him was a compliment," said the man.

"Put out your wrists."

"You forgot your hat, Mac. You can't be the complete enforcer of justice without your brass-studded chapeau."

The deputy hesitated and the man hit him full on the mouth. The deputy dropped the cuffs, shook his head, and fumbled for his revolver. The man hit him again. This time the deputy reeled against the counter and tripped over a stool. The man followed him, his right arm tensed.

The deputy's lips were spongy and bleeding. He had the revolver clear of the holster, raised, when the third blow caught him flush on the jaw. As he threw out an arm to steady himself, the revolver exploded.

The waitress looked at the weapon in astonishment. Her eyes were round, and for the first time they were filled with wisdom. She clutched at the edge of the counter and then slowly sank, until only her eyes showed above the top. Over her head a jet of steaming coffee spurted out of the small circular hole in the metal urn. Presently her head disappeared, as though it had been melted by the thin stream of blackness.

The deputy was still holding the gun in his hand. He looked at it in horrified accusation, as if it had betrayed him. Aghast, the stranger stepped backward, his lips working silently. Both men were gazing downward. A dark pool with crimson edges was seeping from under the counter and forming on the floor beneath the stools.

"Look what you made me do," said Mac.

The stranger shook his head in protest.

"It's all your fault," the deputy went on. "It wouldn't a happened if it wasn't for you."

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The other man looked at him.

"You get it now. You get it good."

"What for?" asked the stranger. "You want that on your mind too?"

The deputy was now advancing toward him. "You come into our town and cause trouble. Look what you caused. Everything was all right until you came in here."

"I just wanted a cup of coffee."

The revolver was pointed at the stranger's chest. "You'll get your coffee—right in hell!"

"You're not God."

"There's nothing that says I can't stomp a rat."

A low moan came from behind the counter, and for just an instant the deputy's finger relaxed on the trigger.

The stranger leaped forward, grabbed at the weapon's barrel, and twisted it upward and back. Mac attempted to jerk it loose from the man's grasp. Both men recoiled from a searing burst of flame as the weapon clattered to the floor. The deputy fell over it, tried to rise, then slumped back as though he were suddenly very sleepy. One of his hands fumbled blindly for the revolver, half hidden by a leg.

The stranger turned and ran out. Behind him the deputy propped himself on an elbow and stared at the emptiness around him. Then he slowly lay down, and became still.

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recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MARY HOCKING**

TITLE: ***The Diamond Killer***

TYPE: Suspense and Detection

LOCALE: Somewhere in Austria

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A bus marooned in a snowstorm—a closed and isolated inn—a heroine in danger—and four suspicious fellow-passengers . . . in a phrase, the "classic" situation—with Continental atmosphere.*

YOU WILL HAVE TROUBLE IN THE mountains, Sara," my Austrian aunt prophesied when I left. She was referring to the weather, but as things turned out the weather was the least of my troubles.

From the beginning it was not a good journey. What with the late start, and the police stopping us to look for "the diamond killer," and then the tall man who boarded the bus arguing with the driver because he didn't want his suitcase put in the luggage compartment, it began to seem as though we should not reach the Swiss frontier by nightfall. I wondered why I had chosen to go overland instead of flying home to London, and probably similar thoughts were occupying the minds of the other four passengers.

I could see the three men who sat in the front half of the bus and after studying them covertly for a while, I labeled them Thin German, Fat German, and Englishman. The tall man was in the rear, out of my range of vision, so I could not stick a label on him.

At first the blizzard came as a welcome diversion—the snow looking so pretty and the temperature in the overheated bus going down nicely; I even thought it was funny when the driver lost his way. An hour later, when we ran into the snowdrift the novelty had worn off.

We managed to flounder out of the drift, but there wasn't much

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hope for the bus and the last time we saw it, the snow was up to the top of the windows.

"There will be no shelter here, Fraulein, not even a mountain hut," the thin German said to me as we bent our bodies against the tearing wind. "We shall certainly die."

The cold blasted the breath from my lungs and I could not reply, but my mind shaped the words "There will be something." Whoever else might perish, I was quite confident that Sara Jenner was going to survive. So I was not really surprised when, very shortly, we came upon the inn. The thin German thanked God fervently and the driver plunged forward and hammered on the door.

The inn looked very picturesque with its sloping roofs and curving balconies now thick with snow—an idyllic sanctuary. But the man who came to the door was peevish and when he held up the lantern which he carried and saw the driver, with our piteous group bunched behind him, there was no compassion on his face.

The driver pushed into the hall and the door slammed, leaving us outside. We hurled ourselves at the door, banging with frozen fists. Inside we could hear the driver shouting angrily. He seemed to win the exchange, for in a moment the door opened again and we all surged in.

Presently, when he could calm us down, the driver told us to go into the bar at the right of the hall while he thrashed matters out with the sullen proprietor. We went meekly, suddenly exhausted—except for the tall man who began to remonstrate with the driver about his suitcase.

The bar must have been shut up for months—it smelled of must and dust, stale tobacco and spirits, and it was chill beyond imagining. Dispiritedly we pushed tables and chairs into the center of the room and flopped down, staring without much hope at the door behind the counter. Eventually it opened and to our surprise a sharp-faced man edged in carrying a promising-looking urn.

"Coffee?" he said, giving us a foxy grin. "Ah, yes, you would like coffee?"

We said we would. "And food," the fat German added firmly.

Life began to appear more bearable. I settled down in a corner with my coffee and sandwiches while the Englishman and the two German leaned against the counter and plied the waiter with questions. The Englishman, who was about forty and looked as though he had set ideas about behavior, said, "We didn't have a very hospitable reception."

"The inn is closed until next month," said the waiter. "I wouldn't be here tonight if it wasn't for the snowstorm."

"Yes, but damn it all, you can't turn people away on a night like this!"

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"Dangerous people around," the waiter said with relish. "This diamond killer is supposed to be in the neighborhood."

"You can't have thought we were all the diamond-killer," the fat German said good-humoredly.

"Ah, but one of you might be."

They laughed heartily and began to talk about the murders connected with the diamond robbery—it all sounded sordid and confused. The diamonds, it seemed, had been kept in some kind of museum and that struck me a silly place to keep diamonds.

I sipped my coffee and wondered if I had ever enjoyed a drink more. In the distance the voices droned on: "No respect for the value of human life"—"killed seven people already"—and then they talked about the diamonds themselves which, it turned out, had been a present from Crown Prince Rudolf to Marie Vetsera and were historically significant as well as being fabulously valuable. I wondered sleepily how much "fabulously valuable" meant in terms of hard cash.

It must have been magnetic attraction which made me turn my head because I did not hear the door open. The tall man stood on the threshold and for the first time I had a good look at him. He was certainly striking and, most certainly, he knew it. He was well over six foot and he held himself with an arrogance that was positively buccaneering; as he shut the door and moved toward the bar, there was a swagger to his walk which would have been ridiculous in a smaller man.

Halfway to the bar he caught sight of me and changed tack as smoothly as a racing yacht. He was at my table in three strides and I was so taken aback that I just stared at him, rather stupidly, over my coffee cup.

"Please to join you?" The question was purely rhetorical because at the same time he drew up a chair. "You are very attractive," he said reproachfully. "In the bus you were all hunched up, and I thought you were at least forty."

"Dear me, were you in the bus?" I said coldly. "I didn't notice you."

The men at the bar were watching us. The fat German winked and the Englishman looked as though he hoped I was not going to let the old country down. I hoped not, too.

My companion searched in his pocket for cigarettes and while he was not looking at me directly, I took the opportunity to study him. He was not disappointing at close range. His curly hair was black and thick and, I thought, a little too long; his face was thin and this made the bones stand out, sharp at the cheek and jaw; the wide mouth was finely chiseled, but it had a curl to it which made him look arrogant, or cruel. He raised his head and I saw that his eyes were a deep

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blue, almost violet, and uncomfortably penetrating.

He offered me a cigarette—a particularly expensive English brand.

"An Englishman gave them to me," he said. "A man at your Embassy in Vienna. Many people give me things."

"People are so kind," I murmured.

The men at the bar were still watching us, and I thought that now they looked rather less amused.

The tall man bent forward to light my cigarette and glanced at me provocatively over the flame. "You think I make all this up? But, you see, I come to Austria with nothing of my own." He lowered his voice, more for effect than out of discretion. "I come from behind the Iron Curtain."

So that was it—an escape story. I tried to blow a smoke ring and failed.

"How were they behind the Curtain?"

He looked at me in amazement. "You do not believe me?"

"But of course. I've just dropped in from Stalingrad myself."

He leaned back in his chair and laughed. It was fierce, rather violent laughter without much humor in it; but there was no doubt he was enjoying himself in his own way. When the spasm had died down, he said, "I like you. I like a woman to have spirit."

Out of the corner of my eye I could see the Englishman's face and I felt that he did not like me. In the meantime my companion was confiding in me again.

"It is true," he was saying, "I make the very memorable escape and now I go to your England; because, you see, I am important and they will be very glad to have me there. Also, I am a writer and I have much writing with me, only unfortunately at the bottom of the bus just now."

I thought that he did not look the academic type and said so.

"I am a man-of-action writer, like Ernest Hemingway and André Malraux." He was watching my face like a hawk. "You do not believe this?"

"What do you write about?" I asked, evading the question.

His lips curled in a rather sardonic smile as though he half enjoyed his persistent scepticism.

"I write about the resistance in Hungary." He leaned toward me again. "I am very dangerous man. For one thing, I have killed."

"Most men of your age have done that," I answered.

This rather blasé response offended him, so he got up and walked over to the counter to get some coffee. I noticed that the men recoiled a little from him and the waiter's hands shook as he poured out the coffee. As I watched them, I was surprised to find how strongly my sympathies ranged themselves on the side of this alien.

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While I was meditating on this, the door opened and the proprietor came in, followed by the driver who was looking unbelievably melancholy, perhaps grieving for his lost bus. The proprietor explained to us that the inn was closed, that the beds were not made up, and that there was, in any case, no bed linen. We could, however, have this room for the night.

"At least you must have a bed for this lady," the Englishman said. I had the feeling that chivalry was not his first concern; for some reason he wanted to get rid of me.

The proprietor looked at me as though he hated me and said that he would see what he could do. Then he went out and the thin German rushed after him to demand that a fire be lit in the bar. The fat German called to the waiter for wine. The driver sat down at the table next to mine and stared at the darkness beyond the window.

"Will you get into trouble for losing your way?" I asked sympathetically. He looked at me with tragic, dark eyes but did not answer. I felt sorry for him.

My tall friend was now back again.

"You go to bed?" he asked wistfully.

"Soon, I hope."

"Alone?"

"Definitely."

He accepted this regretfully. "Everyone tells me that English women are cold."

"Quite right," I agreed heartily.

"What is your name?"

"Sara."

"I am Nikola."

The thin German came back just as Nikola was about to tell me the story of his life and said that the proprietor wanted to show me to my room. The men chorused "Good night" as I went out and the Englishman followed me into the hall.

"You want to be careful," he informed me.

I was convinced that I could handle any situation, so I pretended not to understand him. "You mean the proprietor? He doesn't seem that friendly."

"You know who I mean," he retorted. And as I went up the dark stairs he called after me, "Be very careful." I looked down and saw his upturned face, square, pug-nosed, absurdly anxious.

"It's all right," I assured him. "Beneath this frail exterior I am very tough."

But as the door of the bedroom creaked shut and the sound of the proprietor's feet died away down the corridor, I felt a sense of desolation and I wished that I had stayed downstairs with the rest of the party. I supposed that I was cold and overtired, that sleep would soon restore my spirits. But I was wrong.

To start with, the balcony door rattled incessantly and at least twice I sat up convinced that someone

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was coming into my room. Then, every so often, snow fell from roof or balcony and its soft movement sounded as though some feather-footed creature was moving out there. Finally, when I did manage to doze off, I dreamed of the fabulous necklace which Crown Prince Rudolph had given to Marie Vetsera. A man, whose face I could not see because he stood behind me, was holding it around my neck and it was so incredibly beautiful that I wanted to cry. Then the man leaned forward and felt his breath against my cheek as he whispered, "I have killed seven people, seven people, seven people." I rushed away from him down a long, dark corridor and saw the little waiter coming toward me, but when I cried out for help the waiter flashed me a foxy smile and said, "Have some coffee?" I woke just as the balcony door gave a prolonged rattle.

I decided that I was not tired after all, got up, and dressed quickly. Just before I left the room I looked out of the window. The snow seemed to have stopped and a full moon was riding the sky, very bright and serene. As I watched, a shadow fell across the snow and a figure moved away from the inn: I recognized Nikola because of his height.

At least I won't be worried by him, I told myself as I moved cautiously down the dark stairs. My foot missed a step and although I was holding the banister rail tightly it gave me a nasty jolt. I sat down on the stairs to recover my breath.

The bar door was ajar and I could hear the men talking. They seemed subdued, which surprised me because I had expected that by now they would have drunk themselves mellow.

Just as I was hauling myself to my feet the driver said in a sharp voice, "That is nonsense! You should be careful what you say."

"I'd rather be alive and careless." The waiter sounded excited; I could picture his sharp little face glistening as he spoke. "It's some such place as this he'll be making for, you can be sure. Provided a man is game for a little mountaineering, there are ways across the frontier and mountain guides who are prepared to lend their services for a fee."

"He'd make a rendezvous somewhere, an inn perhaps, and then . . ." This was the fat German.

"Suppose he needed papers, a passport?" It was the foxy waiter talking again.

"There are those that could supply them." I could imagine the wink that accompanied that remark.

Obviously they were still talking about the diamond killer. After my dream I found the subject unpleasant and I hesitated in the hall, wondering whether to go back to my room; but the stairs looked narrow and dark.

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Then I was startled to hear the Englishman say, "It's that damn silly girl that worries me. If there's only a faint possibility that he's the man, we ought to lock him up—even if we look foolish afterwards."

Now I was listening in earnest and the heat of my anger surprised me.

"Lock him up!" The fat German's voice rose shrilly. "Beat him up, you mean! He's a murderer, torturer . . ."

"He said he is a Hungarian," the thin German pointed out.

"But they are the worst, those gypsies." the waiter broke in eagerly. "A wild, cruel race—my grandfather used to tell tales I could hardly repeat . . ."

"The real point," the Englishman said firmly, "is whether the story he was spinning the girl is true. And, of course, it isn't. A fellow doesn't brag about that kind of thing—if he brags you can be sure he is lying."

"He just wanted to create a role for himself as a cover." The fat German sounded triumphant. "And that suitcase he is so anxious about . . ."

"That worries me a bit," the Englishman admitted. "Would he draw attention to it if the diamonds were hidden in it?"

The thin German had the answer to that. "Typical. He is monstrously conceited—doesn't think he needs to take the precautions a normal person would take."

"Madness!" the fat German said.

"I knew it the moment he came up to the counter and I saw his eyes." The waiter was babbling now. "Lock him in the cellar. We shall none of us be safe otherwise. I'll go and find the keys."

Their voices grew louder, the Englishman advocating nonviolence and the fat German making bloodthirsty suggestions. Someone came to the door and I drew back against the wall. It was the driver; he crossed the hall looking more melancholy than ever and went into the Men's Room. After a momen the fat German came out and began to rummage in a cupboard, presumably for weapons; on the wall above my head there were two swords and a wicked, curved hunting knife, but perhaps he was looking for something a little less lethal. He was making a great noise and I managed to slip past him without his noticing me. There was an overcoat on a peg by the front door and I bundled it around me and went out.

As I stumbled through the snow I had no very clear idea of what I was doing; but I was full of a high-minded rage with them for being so bigoted and for using me as an excuse. Nikola, I guessed, had gone down to the bus to see whether there was any hope for his suitcase. Although the wind had dropped, the night air was unbelievably harsh and the long over-

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coat hampered my movements. I was glad when I saw Nikola in the distance, moving toward me. I stood back against a tree and waited.

The snow sparkled on the branches of the tree and the sky beyond was studded with stars. Nikola walked slowly, his head thrown back as though the night exhilarated him. When he was abreast of me, I called his name.

"Nikola."

He swung round, immediately alert, then relaxed when he recognized me. We moved together. He was a wild, exotic creature, silver and black in the moonlight, and I felt uneasy, suddenly alone with him.

"You must go away," I said, my voice trembling. "They think you are the diamond killer and they are going to lock you up."

He did not seem greatly perturbed. "But why should they think that?"

"I don't know. The waiter, I believe . . . But it doesn't matter. You must go."

He laughed, and in the darkness his eyes glinted as hard as diamonds. "And what do you believe, Sara?"

"I don't know." He was so near now. "I don't care. But you must go away."

He looked down at me and smiled a little bitterly. "I like that you do not think me a hero. It is very dull, to be a hero."

His hands were on my shoulders. I thrust him from me and began to stumble along the path to the inn, but the long overcoat tripped me and I fell flat on my face. He picked me up and I knew that he was going to kiss me—and that I was going to let him. It can't have given him much satisfaction, because suddenly I had become very faint and in the end he had to carry me back to the inn. I made him put me down outside. Probably they were all watching us from some hiding place, but I didn't care any more.

"Now, go!" I said in a voice that sounded high and tragic and not at all like myself, and then I plunged into the hall.

I supposed they were still arguing, or making plans, or simply searching for Nikola in some other part of the inn; but there was no one in the hall and I dragged myself across to the bar unnoticed.

The swords and the hunting knife were still in position on the wall and I was glad to see them there. The bar was empty. I sat down at one of the tables, put my head in my hands, and wondered whatever had come over me out there in the snow. After a time I decided that I was being too dramatic about the whole thing. There was a bottle of red wine, half full, on the counter and I thought it might be a good idea to drown some of my cares.

The wine was rough and it made

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me feel very strange and excited, so that I soon wished that I had not had it. I lit a cigarette. A few minutes passed peacefully and then suddenly I experienced an odd, tingling sensation in the back of my neck.

It was absurd, of course, but I was suddenly convinced that I was being watched from the doorway. I held my breath. Overhead there were footsteps and a voice called; nearer, I imagined that I heard stealthy movements in the hall.

"There is one thing to do, of course," I said to myself; but it was a moment or so before I could bring myself to do it.

There was no one in the hall, but just as I turned back to the bar I saw that the hunting knife had been taken down from the wall. I went back to my table and crushed out my cigarette; there was sweat on the palms of my hands and my head had become very cold as though the blood had drained from it. For the first time I thought seriously about the diamond killer.

Then without warning a door banged somewhere at the back of the hall and the confused noise and bustle started afresh. But this time it was different—more subdued, more purposeful. I went to the door. In the distance I could hear the proprietor shouting into a telephone, "Hullo, hullo . . . You see? It doesn't work because of the blizzard."

The proprietor put the receiver down and I heard him go down some stairs at the back of the hall. I walked in that direction. A door stood open and the light of a lamp revealed a stone wall whiskered with cobwebs. I could see steps going down—dark and grimy. Shadows leaped on the wall.

The Englishman's voice floated up out of the darkness. "It doesn't matter now."

His voice was quiet, final. I felt the muscles of my stomach tighten. When I reached the top of the stairs and had a view of the cellar, the thin German was drawing a blanket over something on the floor. I saw one hand spread out, the fingers stiff and arched. There was a bowl of water nearby, stained red.

My lips moved and I was surprised to hear my own voice, cool and controlled, "What is going on down there?"

They looked up at me—the proprietor, the driver, the fat German, the thin German, the Englishman, and in the flickering lamplight I read the same guarded expression on each face.

"It's the waiter," the Englishman said. "He has been stabbed."

For the first time I noticed how small the figure was beneath the blanket.

"Such a harmless little man," the Englishman went on, looking at me steadily. "I can't think why anyone should want to kill him, can you?"

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He began to come up the stairs toward me while the others bunched together, watching. "You are dressed, I see?"

"I have been out," I said dully, without thinking.

The fat German came to the foot of the stairs and whispered, "I told you so. Ask her which way he went. Make her . . ."

The Englishman grabbed my arm. "You had better stay upstairs until we come back."

"But I don't want to stay upstairs," I protested as he propelled me across the hall. "And what do you mean—'until we come back'?"

"We are going after the Hungarian. He can't have gone far yet." He was hustling me up the stairs; when we came to the corridor, he said, "Which is your room?"

"This one. But I don't want to stay up here . . ."

"You will be all right," he assured me coldly. "The proprietor will be here to keep an eye on you."

He opened the door and pushed me inside. The door slammed and I heard the key turn in the lock.

"This will keep you out of trouble," he called into me, which was silly because there was always the balcony door.

After he had gone I lay down on the bed without turning the light on. The darkness seemed more conducive to reflection and I had a lot to reflect about. I thought about the waiter with his foxy grin and I asked myself over and over again if I had been responsible for his death.

There did not seem to be any answer because the answer depended on what I believed about Nikola, and on this subject I no longer seemed capable of reasoned judgment. He might be a complete charlatan, a relentless murderer, or a very brave man—I had no idea which, and out there in the moonlight I had behaved as though I did not care. I felt a sudden surge of hatred for him; yet when I had heard the others going out after him, I knew that once again my sympathies were on his side.

Sensible, controlled Sara Jenner who was sure she could handle any situation—what had become of her?

I was still asking this question a half hour later and getting no helpful answer; there were a lot of other questions, too, and my thoughts began to jumble. In a half haze of sleep I saw the moonlight filtering through the clouds, then just as consciousness was receding something dark seemed to come between me and the moonlight.

I jolted up in the bed, staring at the window. But the moon was shining serenely and I told myself that I had been dreaming. Yet when I went to the window I saw footprints in the snow on the balcony.

The proprietor's rooms were on this side, I knew, but it hardly seemed likely that he would make

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his way to his rooms via the balcony. Who then? It took me some minutes to steel myself to go and find out, but I was spurred on by the realization that action of any kind was preferable to lying locked in my bedroom.

The air was sharp as a razor when I opened the balcony door. There were several rooms beyond mine. I tried the first door, but it was locked. There was a light in the next room and I could see the proprietor moving around. I waited until he had his back to me, then slipped past his window. The next room was a small office and I saw that the door was slightly ajar. Even as I crossed the threshold I knew, in an odd, fatalistic way, who it was that I should find there.

Nikola was bending over a desk trying to pick the lock. He gave me a pleasant smile, put his fingers to his lips, and went on with what he was doing. Obviously he now accepted my allegiance as a matter of course. I saw that the only exit, apart from the balcony door, was through the proprietor's rooms.

I shut the balcony door quietly, locked it, then slipped the key down the front of my dress. If I felt another mad impulse to aid Nikola, this would at least make me pause for reflection. Thus insured against myself, I went toward him.

"You can hold the torch, if you like," he whispered.

"What are you doing?"

"Everyone is so interested in me —now I take an interest in other people."

"Did you kill the waiter?"

The light from the torch cast odd shadows on his face, making it look harsh and older.

"And I thought you had a trusting nature," he said softly.

Our faces were very close.

"No," I whispered. "I don't trust you and I don't trust myself, either. So I intend to call the proprietor and you must explain things to him."

There was a click from the next room and the sound of voices. Someone had come into the proprietor's room. Involuntarily I turned my head to listen and at that moment Nikola sprang. His hand was across my mouth before I could scream. I bit hard, tasted blood, and clawed at his face with my nails.

While we were struggling, the voices in the next room had grown louder, and suddenly the proprietor shouted, "A bus! What the hell made you bring a bus?"

Nikola and I froze.

The other voice was soft and dreamy. At first I did not recognize the driver. "I keep telling you, it was the only way. The police were searching everything on the roads and time was running out. I meant to leave the bus at Senka where there is a long stop and my absence would not be noticed at once; then the blizzard gave me the opportunity of 'losing my way' and driving

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straight up here. The whole maneuver was brilliantly opportunistic, don't you agree?"

"And the real driver?"

"He won't talk." Silence. Then our driver spoke with a great weariness in his voice, "Oh, don't look at me like that. What did it matter, one man more!"

I shuddered and Nikola patted my cheek soothingly. He was still holding me tightly and I derived considerable comfort now from his nearness.

Meanwhile a whine had crept into the proprietor's voice. "That's all very well for you. You will be away by tomorrow when the guide comes to take you across the frontier. But I shall be left to explain a lot of unpleasant things. The dead waiter, for example."

"He was so very near the truth, wasn't he?" The driver sounded quite amiable again. "Especially that bit about your supplying false papers and passports. Are you sure he hadn't been spying on you? No? Oh, well, the results of an overstimulated imagination, no doubt. Sad for him, but I couldn't take the slightest risk." There was the sound of a chair being scraped back. "In any case, why do you worry? The Hungarian will make an ideal villain. An ex-resistance leader, a man conditioned to a life of violence. A hero. You know how everyone hates a hero—they will be only too glad to believe the worst of him."

Suddenly the driver's voice was much nearer.

"Where are the papers, by the way?"

Nikola grabbed my arm and led me swiftly to the balcony door. I watched in horror as he pulled at the handle.

"Nikola," I said, "the key! I . . ."

He gave me a thunderous look and swung back toward the other door; but it was too late—the initiative had passed from our hands. Light flashed on, and I saw the proprietor standing in the doorway, the driver behind him. The driver had a gun and he looked as though he was anxious to use it.

"Stand back," snapped the proprietor and moved forward. For just a second he was in the driver's way. Nikola hurled himself across the room, the driver fired, and I heard the crash of glass behind me.

Nikola shouted to me, "Get down!"

I dropped to the floor. Nearby I saw a foot. I grabbed it, twined my arms round the leg, and brought the proprietor down. He lunged on top of me, and I jerked up my knee and gave him a hard jolt in the stomach. While he was trying to recover his breath I searched around for something with which to hit him.

A violent struggle was going on nearby, but as I could not tell in that mass of flailing limbs which was Nikola and which was the driver, it seemed best not to inter-

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vene. Above all the confusion there was a strange, high-pitched wailing. After a moment I realized it was me, screaming like a banshee.

I took off my shoe and tried to hit the proprietor on the head with it, but he evaded me and grabbed my wrist. I could see the driver now, his face terribly white, his eyes wide and unfocused; he was bending over Nikola and bringing the gun down, down . . .

"No, no!" I screamed, as though that would help.

The proprietor was dragging me across the floor toward the other room. I thrashed about desperately, kicking and bitting, but he had me in a secure grip. Although I could no longer see them, I could hear Nikola and the driver straining for breath. Then for a moment there was silence—while the thread of life stretched taut between them.

It seemed that the whole house held its breath.

I counted the seconds—one, two, three, four . . .

A scream came, barely human—then the gun spoke.

The proprietor let go of me and I covered my face with my hands. I heard the proprietor saying, "Oh, God, oh, God"—over and over again. Somewhere a door creaked and a voice began to screech, "Beast! Swine!" It sounded like the fat German.

When I looked up, I saw Nikola standing with the gun in his hand, his clothes torn and blood streaming down his face. He looked across at me and smiled.

While Nikola and I looked at each other, the others burst into the room. The Englishman strode across to Nikola and said sternly, "Give me that gun." Nikola gave it to him and the Englishman looked disconcerted. The thin German was helping me to my feet while the fat German was saying to the proprietor, "Don't worry, we met a patrol. The police will be here any minute."

The Englishman bent over the driver and began to unbutton his shirt. "This man is dead," he announced grimly. "You will pay . . ." He stopped and then said in an altogether different tone, "Good God!"

We crowded forward. The driver was a limp, crumpled heap lying amid broken wood and splintered glass. There was blood and ugliness there, but all we could see at that moment was the glitter of the Vetsera diamonds as they lay on the dead man's breast, magnificent, yet terrible in their radiant purity.

So that was how it ended—there is nothing more to tell. Except that as our plane touched down in London a week later, Nikola asked me to marry him and I, of course, said no.

"That is all right," he assured me. "I should not like you to accept at once. I enjoy the chase."

And I realized that my troubles were just beginning . . .

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JOHN DENVER**

TITLE: ***The Seven Kid***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A social worker tells how young Frankie Butler had it made—how nothing could possibly go wrong. You see, Frankie had a lucky number—and it never missed . . .*

SOMEONE ONCE SAID TO ME: "YOU don't get paid enough to live on—anything bad happens in the neighborhood you get blamed for it—those junior hoodlums treat you like an enemy. So tell me: what satisfaction, what reason is there for being a youth counselor?"

And I was deeply embarrassed because at that moment I couldn't think of a single one—not a single satisfaction or reason that I could shape into words.

The trouble was, all those indictments were perfectly true. We don't make enough money; we do get blamed for not stopping trouble even before it happens; and we're not made to feel exactly at home by the juveniles we try to help.

But the life of a social worker has at least one compensation: it can become rich in recollection. I've certainly met some youngsters I won't forget in a hurry.

Like Frankie Butler, The Seven Kid.

Perhaps he really didn't qualify as a youngster—I learned later that he was nineteen—but he looked much younger: a wiry little wisp of slum-bred humanity set apart by a narrow, foxlike face, a pair of brilliant but shifty eyes, and a grin that said, *I've got it made,* and kept right on saying it no matter what the odds.

I'd heard about him before I met him—"the kid with the seven bug," whatever that was—and had been warned: "Don't shoot craps

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with that character. He'll murder you."

This was no great risk to me—my expense account doesn't provide gambling funds; but the day I met him I lost money just the same.

It was in the Varick Street neighborhood, the territory of the Royal Bengals, and I was lounging against a lamp post near their candy store hangout hoping to make a contact.

Gaining the confidence of the Bengals was a discouraging process. They had a clause in their rules and regulations about strangers. So I was waiting there hoping for a break when a voice said, "Bet you a buck the next car that comes around the corner is a 7."

I turned and looked, and knew that the lad standing beside me must be The Seven Kid. I knew also that he was a member of the Royal Bengals and I wasn't going to let this possible break slip away.

"What do you mean—a 7?"

"The license plate—a 7," he answered as though any idiot should know what he was talking about.

I didn't but I said, "Okay, it's a bet."

We didn't have long to wait. A few seconds later a Ford came around the corner and The Seven Kid said, "The plate reads 865294—right?"

I studied the plate. "Right."

"So it's a 7. So you owe me."

"I don't get it."

"Add up the numbers."

I added as rapidly as my nonmathmatical brain would permit. "8 and 6 are 14—5 and 2 make it 21—add the 9 and 4 and that comes to 34—"

"And 3 and 4 are 7 and that makes you owe me."

"Now wait just a minute—"

"You can't goof with numbers—They always come out the same. You gonna pay up or you gonna welsh?"

I gave him one of the dollars I had been saving for a new pair of slacks and said, "That was a neat trick. Does the guy in the car get a half a buck?"

He was insulted. "I never saw the guy or the car before."

"Then how did you know? The plate could have added up to one of the other digits."

"I never miss," he said smugly. "The number 7 never lets me down 'cause I'm a 7 myself. When you're a 7, it always sticks by you 'cause it's your lucky number."

"But it can't work every time!"

"Okay, want to try again?"

"Why not? I can use that buck I just gave you."

"The next car," he said.

Three cars had turned the corner in the interim and the next one had a plate that read—945106. I toted it up, handed him a second dollar, and figured the slacks I had would have to last me another few months.

"Okay, you were lucky, but what do you mean—you're a 7?"

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"I was born on January 24th."

I was getting the knack of it by now. No matter how big the number was, you broke it down and added up the individual numbers until they were reduced to a single digit.

"That's only 6," I said.

"Nope. January's the first month of the year. That makes it a 1, so you add it to the day. 24 and 1 make 25, 2 and 5 make 7."

"I guess you're right at that." He eyed me with two bucks' worth of friendliness—not patronizingly, but still a little the way a man in the chips might look at a bankrupt.

"When were you born?" he asked.

"June 3rd."

"That makes you a 9. That makes 9 your number."

"Is that good?"

His expression clearly said it wasn't. "Johnny Bentz is a 9."

"Who's Johnny Bentz?"

"One of the Bengals. He's in the can for rolling the wrong drunk."

"Then 9 is not very lucky?"

"It's not as bad as 4. That's the worst. My old man was a 4. He got poisoned to death on some bad booze down on the Bowery. My old lady, she had a bad number too. It pushed her around till she went and drowned herself from not getting any good breaks."

"What about you? Where do you live?"

"I got me a room over on 7th Avenue and I do fine. You want to bet on another license plate?"

I said I didn't and tried to draw him into conversation about the Bengals, but The Seven Kid turned and left me with not even a goodbye.

The rumble we feared didn't come off and after a while I wormed my way into the Bengals—at least into the fringes of their organization—and got to know The Seven Kid fairly well.

The rest of the gang accepted him casually as "the kid with the 7 bug," and paid tribute to his lucky number by refusing to allow him in back alley crap games.

He didn't resent this exclusion in the least. "They'd be crazy to let me in," he once told me. "I'd break 'em. A 7 guy can bust up any crap game in the world."

And that's how it was with The Seven Kid—and his lucky number. I marveled at him until it dawned on me that he had something that made him more fortunate than the rest. A belief. A faith. However ridiculous their basis, the belief and faith were there, and they put him far ahead of the others who had no faith in anything whatever, not in themselves or even in their numbers.

But even I didn't realize to what extent his lucky number had become a part of The Seven Kid—not until he got into trouble. I learned of the trouble one morning

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when I got a call from the precinct police station. They had him.

I went there and inquired about the charges. The desk sergeant said, "We've got him cold. Burglary. A cop on Arleigh Street caught him crawling out the broken window of a fur shop with enough skins to start a new business."

"There's no doubt as to his guilt?"

The officer shrugged. "No problem there. Go back and talk to him. He'll tell you himself."

I was shocked when I saw The Seven Kid. He could have been another person—a bewildered, beaten, hopeless person. When he looked up at me his eyes were dull, there was a droop to his usually erect shoulders, and a look of despair on his face.

"My number went back on me," he said.

I sat down on the bench beside him. "Tell me about it."

"Ain't nothing to tell. I'm just dead, that's all. My number let me down."

"You're blaming all this on your 7?"

"What else? I crack this joint on 7 Arleigh at exactly 4:30 this morning and this is the 7th of July. I even count the skins before I take them. There was 26, so I pull one skin out and leave it behind. I couldn't miss—I just couldn't!"

"But a policeman was there when you came out."

"Uh-huh. My number went back on me."

There was a stricken note in his tone and I realized the tragedy went deeper than the crime he had committed and the punishment that the crime merited. I was witnessing the destruction of the kid's faith.

It could have been argued that a faith based on such a fallacy had to be wrecked sooner or later, and that was no doubt true. But this did not make the wrecking process less agonizing, less pitiful to watch.

The Seven Kid went through the hearing like a zombie—he just didn't care one way or another. I tried to bring him out of it, to make him listen to logical arguments that would give him a more dependable foundation for the future; but I got nowhere. My words went over his head.

The sentence went over his head, too. Five years in the penitentiary.

He shrugged and said, "It don't make no difference. I'll prob'ly break my neck before I get there."

So The Seven Kid went to jail, his private and personal god having deserted him, and there was nothing to indicate that the sojourn behind bars would do him the slightest good.

This feeling was in my mind two months later when I had occasion to visit the State Pentitentiary and appear before the parole board on another matter.

Before my bus left the prison,

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I had time to drop in on Warden Spencer. "Thought I'd inquire about one of my boys—he was in pretty bad shape when he was brought up here."

"You probably mean Frankie Butler?"

"I'm surprised you knew who I meant."

Warden Spencer was a good man at his job. No softie—still he gave the men a fair shake. "Sure I know him. And he's no problem. Doing fine. He's got a good spirit. I put him in the machine shop and I never saw a lad more eager to learn. He'll do only the minimum."

"Somehow that doesn't add up, Warden. Mind if I see him?"

"Not at all. I'll have him sent over."

I went to the visiting wing and The Seven Kid came in and his face lit up with the old grin. "Hello, sucker. What did you bring me—a saw?"

"A message from the Warden. He says behave yourself and do your work and you can get out with maximum time off."

The Seven Kid laughed. "Yeah, I know. My number came back. It's workin' for me again."

I said I was glad. We chatted a while and then the guard came for him. And as he marched jauntily away with a wave of his hand, I saw exactly what The Seven Kid meant.

He had regained his faith.

The Seven Kid was convict number 63385.

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YACHT FOR A COFFIN

by GORDON GASKILL

(continued from page 41)

My brain told me coldly that I'd sink with the boat, trapped, all the way down to the great depths, where no Aqua-lung would do me any good.

But the rope held. Slowly the *Viking* came to rest again. The pressure stopped, and I flipped outside fast, my heart racing. Now she lay in almost the opposite direction. Her bow pointed up to the surface, held by our rope, taut now as a fiddle string. I looked it over carefully; it seemed to be holding all right.

Still, in my heart, I didn't want to go inside any more. But I remembered that one last suitcase, the one with her papers. It might make all the difference.

So I got hold of myself and dived once more, every nerve tight. I noticed that the *Viking's* changed position had flung open the chartroom door. I caught a glimpse of jumbled papers, books, navigation instruments—and, in the middle, the metal lockbox where Cy had kept his ship's papers and our passports.

I remembered Hans Huber moaning, "What shall we do without passports?" I decided that water-soaked ones were better than nothing, and would help in getting new ones.

It took only a second to pick up the lockbox. I tied it, and the last suitcase, to a line and signaled them to haul it way. They did, but too jerkily, perhaps because of the roughening sea.

Naïvely, I had assumed a lockbox would be locked, but this one wasn't. Halfway to the surface it pulled open, for I had tied the rope through the lid handle. Papers spilled out like a slow snowstorm, scattering lazily in the water, finally coming to rest, some of them, in clefts and crevices near the boat. Others went down in deeper water.

But the passports, held together in one pack by a thick rubber band, were heavier, and sank more swiftly. I kicked hard with my flippers and caught up with them before they went too deep. Then, gratefully, I shot back up to the surface.

The sea was even rougher now than I'd thought. All the small boats had gone ashore, except one with Cy, Montgomery, and my nephew. Wilma Wardell's body and most of her luggage had gone ashore too.

Cy looked at me gravely. "No doubt about it at all now, I guess."

I shook my head. I was shivering. Dennis asked, "No jewels?"

"No jewels," I said. "Let's go ashore. I'm freezing to death."

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Cy looked morosely at the soggy mass of passports. I apologized for the papers that had fallen out, but he shrugged. "Forget 'em. Ship's papers for a sunken ship don't amount to much, do they?" He glanced at me curiously. "You inside when she broke loose?" When I nodded, he pursed his lips. "Not much fun, I guess. That line seems to be holding her, though."

Halfway to the beach. I realized I'd left the big wrench down in the *Viking*. I wasn't inclined to go back for it now and, anyway, I couldn't see how it would tell us any more than we knew.

I think every person on Salicudi Island, except for Hans Huber, was huddled on the beach, looking at the body wrapped in a tarpaulin from an Italian lobster boat. I told them exactly what I'd found.

"If you can add it up any other way," I said, "I'd love to hear it. But here's the way it looks to me: when we struck, she ran straight to her cabin for the jewels. Then she remembered Merlin. It was dark, but she had that little flashlight on her key chain. She went down there—and somebody got her. With that big wrench, I think." I looked around, but their faces were all tight, staring masks.

"That's no help," I said. "Everybody knew about the tools in the engine room. And anybody, man or woman, could have swung it hard enough."

Still nobody spoke, and I kept on: "I think he—or she—hit her just outside the bathroom, in the corridor, where I found the key chain. She probably dropped it then, and the jewel box, too. Then he dragged her into the bathroom, locked it, threw away the key to make sure. He couldn't know how long the boat might still float. And somebody else might come down to rescue the cat."

"Somebody like me," Peter Lillesden said softly. "But I swear the door was already locked when I got there, and the key was already gone."

His words hung in the air, but nobody moved. I went on, "Then he picked up the jewel box, forced it open, took the jewels—and dropped the box where he was. That was a mistake, but he couldn't know that when the boat turned and twisted, and as the water rose inside her, the wooden box would float up and out."

That was as far as I could go. After a long time Cy said in a hoarse voice, "And now what, Bob? About the law, the police?" He forced a smile. "After all, you're the lawyer."

"Not that kind of lawyer," I said. "All I can suggest is to do the best we can. Sometime or other, the Italian police will take over. The ship may be gone by then, if a bad storm comes up. And of course, in this kind of weather, the—" I stopped, gesturing to the tarpaulin-covered body. "We're simply going

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to have to bury her here, right away."

Julie Locke made a faint moaning sound. The count's hand moved to steady Anita Stapp, but she pulled away, not looking at him.

The next hour was not pleasant. Reluctantly the Spanish sailors dug a grave in the dry sand behind the beach, out of reach of the waves, and there we buried Wilma Wardell, still wrapped in the tarpaulin. The authorities could always find her.

Gradually the group dispersed. I saw De Verrier talking earnestly to Anita. Her face was closed, expressionless. At last he shrugged and walked off to join the new French yachting arrivals. She went off slowly toward the *pensione,* face set.

Cy and I, left alone, began checking over the pile of waterlogged luggage, once so new and smart, that I'd sent up from Wilma Wardell's cabin. It was depressing work, but we found two things that might, or might not, help. Both were, luckily, still clear enough to read.

The first was a check-book stub showing that about three weeks before, she'd written a $4,200 check to Peter Lillesden. And as Cy pointed out, "Dated the day before we left Cannes! Now, what in thunder—?"

The second was a hastily scrawled list, apparently, of things she planned to do. Most looked entirely innocent: a bill to pay a famous French *couturier,* a reminder to renew her driving license, to donate to a French charity, and so on. But I stared, frowning, puzzled at two other items on the list: *Huber contract . . . Codisil.*

Cy repeated the last word curiously. "What the heck's that?"

"She misspelled it," I said slowly, "but a codicil is an amendment or a change to a will."

His eyebrows went up, and he looked at me with bright, questioning eyes. But he said nothing more.

Charles De Verrier was walking toward us from a group of his compatriots, looking curiously at the bedraggled baggage. But he said only, "The French yacht is leaving at dawn tomorrow. Not for Palermo, but for another island about fifty miles away, east. There is a telegraph station there, and the owner asks if you wish him to notify Palermo what has happened, and perhaps order a salvage boat."

"Fine!" Cy said, eyes gleaming. He made some calculations. "He ought to get there tomorrow night. And if the salvage boat started right away, it could be here the day after that. If only that blasted rope holds. . . . !"

"And he might suggest," I told De Verrier, "that they send some police along with the salvage boat. Someone who speaks English, if possible."

The count nodded. *"Bien!* I shall

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tell him." He walked back to the Frenchmen.

I was wound up tight—restless, baffled, impatient, my head filled with a dozen theories and suspicions. I pulled out the damp bits of paper from my pocket and glared at them. The *codisil* part I'd have to figure out for myself, and I had some ideas.

But what about *Huber contract* and the check to Lillesden? I had no authority to cross examine anybody. On the other hand, I'd have to turn these things over to the Italian police—and wasn't it a dirty trick on my fellow guests to do this without letting them know beforehand? I convinced myself it was only fair to ask some questions.

Dennis, easily bored, was swimming in shallow water near the beach, with a mask. I called him in and asked if he knew where Lillesden or Huber was. "Sure!" he said nonchalantly. "I know where everybody is. I'm keeping an eye on them. This mask is swell for that. You can see everybody, and nobody knows you're looking at him. And if I see anyone doing—you know—anything funny I'm going to follow him."

"Listen, Buster," I told him sternly, "and I'm not kidding. I know your heart's in the right place, and that you were probably a Junior G-man in your youth. But don't go off following anybody alone—hear me? Whoever did this isn't playing for marbles. And I don't want to lug a corpse all the way to Paris. Get it?"

I don't often impress him, but I made it this time. He nodded seriously, chastened. "Okay, Bob!" he said. "But if I do see something, how about telling you and we'll both follow them?"

"Fine!" I said. "We'll do that. And now, how about Mr. Lillesden and Mr. Huber?"

He concentrated. "Well, Mr. Lillesden went up there." He pointed to the rocky point on the side of the bay. "I think he's drawing pictures. And the German's always out walking, although what's worth looking at on this place I—Hey, there he is now, coming back."

Huber was coming slowly down the path that meandered in to the *pensione* from the other side of the island.

"Okay, J. Edgar," I said to Dennis. "Go on with your spy work, but remember what I said."

I walked over to the *pensione* and waited for Huber. He looked at me curiously, and I remembered he hadn't been around when we brought up Wilma Wardell's body. I explained briefly what had happened. Something flickered for an instant deep in his eyes, but his face seemed tight and shocked.

"A horrible thing!" he said when I finished. "Horrible!"

His cabin, I suddenly remembered, had been closest of all to the bathroom, and I asked him if he'd seen anything suspicious. He

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thought it over and shook his head. Then I gave him a routine about how I'd have to show the police anything we had found, I showed him the soggy list with *Huber contract* on it.

I thought he reacted more sharply than before. He stared at the paper, moistening his lips. He seemed trying to make up his mind about something. "Look, Mr. Henderson," he said softly, urgently, in his careful English. "This is—this was only a personal business affair between Mrs. Wardell and myself. I swear to you, on my honor, it has nothing at all to do with this terrible thing. But it would be very bad if this became public—for purely business reasons. Is there no way we can forget about it?" He paused, then went on tentatively, "It would be very much to your advantage."

He couldn't help being heavy-handed, even when trying bribery. But I kept sharpness out of my voice and said mildly, "Well, I can't very well keep something quiet when I don't know what it is, can I?"

I don't think I fooled him a minute. He examined me with sharp eyes, then shook his head slowly. "No, Mr. Henderson. That I cannot tell you. Not now, anyway." He walked away.

Then suddenly he turned. "Ah, yes! You asked if I recalled anything strange that night. I just remember something that did not seem strange then, but it might have been. It was Mr. Lillesden. He passed by my cabin door, quickly. He had a cigarette lighter lighted, so I could see who it was—and what he carried. It was one of those small, red fire extinguishers that the captain had at various places in the ship. A small thing, but quite heavy."

Then he went on into the *pensione,* not turning again.

Slowly I began climbing the steep rocky path that, according to Dennis, Lillesden had taken. But I was still thinking about Huber. Had he been merely malicious? The wrench didn't *have* to be the murder weapon, and Lillesden had admitted being down there—to liberate the cat, he said.

The path was tricky, and I had to be careful. At several places it dropped off abruptly toward the sea. As I went higher, I had a wonderful view of this end of the island, including our bay. It was tortured, worthless-looking land, faintly yellow in places, cracked and faulted where volcanic heavings had split the earth's crust. A wonderful place, I thought, for hide-and-seek.

I went on climbing, switching back and forth, finally emerging on the flattened top of a knoll-like point. I found Lillesden sitting on a rock, using a piece of flat driftwood as a makeshift easel. He looked up as I came near. "Oh, hello, Henderson!"

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"Quite a place," I said. The view was wonderful. The French yacht looked like a pretty toy on a mirror. The orange rubber boat of the young French campers floated near the reef; they seemed to be hunting fish again. Julie and Montgomery were at this end of the bay, in a dinghy. Cy was still near the luggage. At the *pensione,* nobody stirred.

I moved around behind him to see what he was drawing. It was a surprisingly good sketch of the bay. "Not bad." I said, impressed. "Not bad at all."

He laughed, pleased. "Thanks. Not much, but it's fun. Helps pass the dreary hours, you know. If I only had better materials."

I watched him curiously. He looked a bit wispish, but a lot of very tough young Britons affect wispishness—and turn out to be the first people up Everest. I gave him the same prelude I'd given Huber, and then tactfully mentioned the $4,220 check.

His pencil stopped suddenly. "Oh," he said at last, not looking at me. "So you've dug that up, have you?"

I waited. And waited. He began drawing again, putting in the French yacht with a few deft lines. "Look, old man," he said at last, still not turning his head, "if you're expecting an explanation from me, you'll wait a very long time. You'll forgive me if I say you've no right to ask questions."

The lawyer in me agreed, but I don't like brush-offs that direct. "There'll be other questions, too," I said tightly. "About fire extinguishers, for instance."

Again the pencil stopped. The tips of his ears began to redden, and he seemed about to say something. But he didn't. He reached over to a pocket-knife lying on a rock, and very carefully began sharpening the dulled pencil point.

"Our family crest, Henderson," he said in a low voice, "has an odd thing on it—a porcupine. And the motto is *Nemo me impune lacessit.* Roughly, nobody hurts me and gets away with it."

He went back to his drawing, and said not one more word. Finally I walked back down the winding path.

Dinner was awful. The food was bad again; the kerosene lights added no gaiety, and hardly anyone said a word.

Lillesden and Huber cut me dead. Anita Stapp was a silent, bitter ghost, and Charles de Verrier's chair was empty. Julie Locke was jumpy and Montgomery seemed seized by some odd restraint. Cy, Dennis, and I shouldn't have been affected, but in all that shadowy suspicion and smoldering anger, there wasn't much to say.

I was glad when it was over. I suggested that Cy begin getting together a captain's statement on how the wreck occurred. It took a long

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time. We had to write it in pencil and revise it several times to get it neat and logical.

Later I walked out into the cool darkness. The riding lights of the French yacht shimmered in the middle of the bay. Then I saw a different light, the tiny red tip of a glowing cigarette. A shadowy figure was leaning against a lobster boat. I walked closer, my shoes making almost no sound in the sand until I was very near.

It was Anita Stapp. She turned, startled. "Oh, it's you!"

I had heard warmer welcomes. From the way she drew at her cigarette I knew she was nervous. Was it fright or something else?

She looked always in the same direction, toward the French yacht. Suddenly she said, jerkily, "He's out there, with them. I think he's going away with them, in the morning."

I controlled my surprise. "Did De Verrier say so?" I asked.

"No," she admitted, "but they invited him. I heard that. They said they had room for just one. Anything for a brother Frenchman! Just like him, isn't it?"

"I don't know," I said. "You know him better than I do."

She said bitterly, "That's what I used to think, too!"

There was a long silence and at last I said, "Sometimes it's better to talk about things."

"You're not quite old enough to play Dutch uncle!" she said angrily. Then she shrugged. "He kept asking me what my aunt said the other day when we had the row, the one Julie was kind enough to mention. He wanted to know if it was about him."

"And?"

"Of course it was!" she snapped. "What else? But if he thinks—" She stopped suddenly and then hurled her cigarette out into the sea. After a while I decided to break through her silence. I told her we'd found that reference to a codicil.

She asked sharply, "You're not going to tell the police are you?"

"We can't hide it," I explained. "It's not only unethical, but illegal."

Her voice was jeering. "A fine lawyer we've got!"

"Any lawyer would do the same, any good one," I said mildly. "But I don't have to repeat anything you tell me, as lawyer to client."

She seemed to be thinking that over, then suddenly she began talking, as if it were a relief. "It was an awful row. She was furious—about Charles and me. She said somebody was going to be sorry about it. I didn't know what she meant then, but it's clear enough now!" She whirled on me. "Isn't it? That she was going to make a codicil so that he *wouldn't* get the villa back?"

And you think, I said to myself, that he killed her before she could do it. But aloud I said something else, "You told him what she'd threatened?"

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"Of course."

"But he says," I pointed out, "that he hadn't the slightest idea he was going to get the villa anyway."

"He says a lot of things."

"The police," I said slowly, "are going to have some other ideas about that codicil business. You say she was furious at *him*. But she was furious at you too, wasn't she?"

"And how!" she said bitterly. Then she got the point, and gasped.

"Don't blame me," I said bluntly. "That's the way the police will look at it."

"You mean that I was afraid she'd change her will—about me—and that I—" She stopped. In the darkness, I couldn't read her face. "And maybe *he* thinks so, too," she said unevenly. "But it's crazy! We've had rows before, lots of them, but—" She groped for another cigarette. I held out a match, and in its brief flaring her face was white and taut.

Then she rushed on. "But why not Julie? If Aunt Wilma had found that 'John' was really Montgomery, she'd have cut Julie out so fast that—"

"But she didn't find out, apparently," I said curtly. "At least, not so far as anybody can tell. Did *you* know who he really was?"

She was silent a moment. "No," she said. "Julie didn't tell me. She never tells me anything." Then she looked up at me. "And even if I had known, do you think I'd run to my aunt, telling tales?"

I don't know how I'd have answered, under oath, but I didn't have to. She rushed on. "I'm scared! Everybody's scared—except one, the one who did it. And who was it? You can't trust anybody. Maybe you, although . . . I don't think I can take much more of this." She turned swiftly and ran back to the *pensione*.

I stood there, staring out at the French yacht. If De Verrier was really going off with them, I ought to do something about it. But what? I hadn't the slightest authority to stop him. The best I could do was point out to him how his leaving would look to the police.

I needed an excuse to talk to him. I decided to pretend I wanted the French yacht to relay a cable to my office. Then I realized I really ought to send a cable anyway, telling them about Wilma Wardell. In the *pensione* I wrote out the cable, then took a dinghy and rowed out to the yacht.

She was comfortable, even luxurious. The French owner immediately agreed to send my cable from the next island, and insisted on giving me some wonderful brandy. Still, I wasn't comfortable. I felt De Verrier's eyes on me, hooded, vaguely mocking.

I spoke no French, and De Verrier had to keep translating for me. It made things sticky. Finally it seemed foolish to stay any longer. I stood up, said thanks and good

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night. Then, trying to make it sound casual, I said to De Verrier, "Can I give you a lift ashore?"

If he said no, I was at least going to point out what the police would think. But he eyed me a moment, and then smiled. "Thanks. It will save these people the trip." And he came with me.

I awoke very early next morning. Even Dennis was still asleep. But the sun was well up, the sea blue and calm, the few clouds gold and pink. I quietly picked up mask, snorkel, flippers, and a spear gun, and tiptoed outside. A summer morning in the best part of the day —certainly the best for fishing.

The French yacht was already gone. I saw her a couple of miles off, under power. There was not yet a breath of wind for sailing. I thought everybody else on Salicudi Island was asleep, but then I saw splashing down by the boats. A figure waded out, reaching for a towel, and I recognized the tall, gaunt Englishman. I walked slowly down to the beach myself.

Yesterday's antagonism seemed gone. "Wonderful water!" he said briskly. I agreed, and went in myself.

As I waded out, Lillesden watched me curiously. It didn't take him long to come to the point. "I was a bit of a fool yesterday," he said abruptly. "I know you've no authority to be asking questions, but I also realize you're entitled to know things—and I began to see how they'd look to a policeman."

I waited. He went on, "I can't ask you to keep the check thing quiet, but I'd be really grateful if you could. The London papers would make an awful mess of it. *'Peer's Son Evades Currency Control'*—that sort of thing. For that's what it was, you know. Technically illegal, but everybody does it."

British currency regulations, he said, allow one person to take out of the country only 100 pounds per year—about $280—which is almost nothing in Europe. So he'd made a deal with Wilma Wardell to get some dollars. She'd given him the $4,200 and he'd agreed to give her the sterling equivalent—£1,500—in England whenever she wanted it.

That's all there was to it, he said. I wanted to get his story straight. "So you haven't actually given her the sterling yet, or your sterling check?"

He glanced at me. "Of course not. It has to be done in person, in England. A check would give the whole show away to any bank manager. This kind of thing is always done by gentlemen's agreement. Wouldn't do to have anything on paper." Then he looked at me oddly. "Come to think of it, now I can't repay her, can I? So what do I do—pay her estate, or Julie or Anita? But I can't do it openly, you know."

"That can be worked out, I im-

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agine," I said. "But how about the fire extinguisher?"

He looked out at the sea. "I can't expect you not to tell the police about that one, but here's what happened: when I went to let the cat out I thought the door was jammed. I picked up the nearest heavy thing to try to batter it open —and that happened to be a fire extinguisher. They were all over the boat, you know. Anyway, it didn't work; it wasn't heavy enough. When you go down this morning, you'll find it in the corridor where I dropped it."

I shook my head. "The trouble is, I can't go *inside* the ship any more. That takes an Aqua-lung—and there goes the only Aqua-lung I could use." I pointed to the French yacht far out on the horizon.

"Oh," he said again. "Well, if you can't, you can't, I suppose."

He threw the towel over his shoulders, pulled on his trousers, and walked toward the *pensione*.

I pushed off the dinghy and rowed out to the reef. It was the best fishing time, and I could still see if the *Viking* was all right, although there hadn't been a breath of wind last night to disturb her.

Something rattled around in the bottom of the dinghy. It was a sailor's knife, with a thick, folding blade and a heavy, tapered spike for splicing. It was the knife Lillesden had used yesterday to sharpen his pencil—or one just like it.

I let the dingy drift, put on my gear, cocked the spear gun, and dived overboard.

The *Viking* was gone.

Gone without trace, gone now forever.

I stared down into the blue abyss where she lay now, invisible, beyond all hope of salvage. The rope was gone, too, every sign of it, and for a moment I wondered, dazed, if I had come to the right place. But some of the spilled ship's papers were still there, caught in cracks and crevices of the rock face, and that proved I made no mistake.

I crawled back into the dinghy, my head spinning. How had she gone? Surely the rope couldn't have chafed through. There'd been no wind, no sea.

I picked up the knife. Tiny, almost invisible fibers were caught in the hinge spring. Dark and brown, exactly like the rope we had borrowed from the Italian fishermen, to eke out the line.

Somebody had gone out stealthily, probably last night, using this very dinghy, this very knife, and deliberately cut the *Viking* loose.

But why? I could think of only one reason: to destroy forever some evidence that must be dangerous to whoever killed Wilma Wardell.

But what evidence? All I could think of was the wrench, and I didn't believe that after being so long in the sea it would show fingerprints or bloodstains.

I began rowing ashore, and sud-

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denly rested the oars. It occurred to me what a smart defense lawyer could do with the case—if there ever was a case. He might convince a jury the head wound had been an accident, from falling, as the ketch lurched. It would be tough, but I'd seen juries swallow bigger lumps. He might argue the jewels had never been stolen, that they were still somewhere on the boat. He might even argue that whoever took my Aqua-lung had been down there, ahead of me, and taken the jewels.

Only *I* knew it wasn't true. Only *I* knew the bathroom door had been really locked, not just jammed. Only I had seen the wrench. I'd told the rest about these things, of course, but that was mere hearsay, valueless in court. Now, with the *Viking* gone forever, I was the star witness, almost the only witness. I knew what sometimes happened to star witnesses, and I didn't like it. I decided to play it very safe, and not turn my back to anyone.

For once, everyone came down to breakfast together. When I walked in, I'd decided what to do. At first I didn't say a word about the yacht's disappearing. Instead, I held up the knife and asked, as casually as I could, "Anybody lose this?"

"Mine, I think." It was Montgomery's voice answering. "But I lent it to Lillesden yesterday."

Lillesden nodded, puzzled. "Quite right. Can't think where I left it, though. Where did it turn up?"

"In the dinghy," I said. I turned to Montgomery. "You were out in her yesterday afternoon, weren't you, with Julie?"

He colored slightly. "Of course! Why not? Other people were out in her too. Weren't you, yourself, last night, for instance? Anyway, I'd already given Lillesden the knife before I went out."

"And," Lillesden said impatiently, "I haven't set foot in the dinghy since—not even this morning. Aren't you making quite a to-do about a cheap knife?"

Then I told them about the *Viking,* trying to read their faces, to see who was not surprised. And failing.

Cy was staring at me, looking suddenly drained, looking five years older. "Gone? For good?"

"I'm afraid so," I said. "And this knife did it."

Lillesden stood up suddenly. "Somebody's trying to throw dust in our eyes!" he said, blazing. "Do you think I'd be fool enough—if I *had* cut her loose—to leave the knife right there? The worst damning evidence there is? Don't be an idiot!" He stalked out of the room angrily.

I didn't like that day. Too many things were gone—Wilma Wardell, her jewels, my Aqua-lung, and

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now the *Viking* herself. I didn't want to join them.

I was nervous and watchful, like a rabbit in a closing ring of hunters. Dennis would have been ashamed of me, and I was a little ashamed of myself. But I didn't need law school to learn the law of self-preservation.

And I hadn't been very bright. I'd forgotten to bring up the wrench. Despite the sea water, a laboratory analysis might have shown something. And whatever fingerprints might have been on the knife or dinghy oars I'd innocently obliterated myself, before realizing the *Viking* was gone.

It seemed fantastic that nobody had seen or heard what happened near the bathroom. Lillesden had been there, although a flickering cigarette lighter wouldn't show much. Cy had finally found a flashlight and had been near there, but intent on the smashed planking on the opposite side of the boat. Hans Huber's own cabin was nearest of all, nearly next door.

But it could have been any of the others, too; the *Viking* wasn't that big a ship. Yet, apparently, in the darkness and confusion, no one had paid any attention to what anyone else did.

Or so they said.

They couldn't even alibi one another. Not even Montgomery could alibi himself, or Julie. I'd recalled to him, as tactfully as possible, how I'd seen him rush aft, instead of forward, to his own quarters.

"Of course!" he'd said blushing. "Do you think I'd worry about a bag of old clothes when Julie—"

"You found her?" I'd asked.

He'd glared at me before saying finally, curtly, "No, it was too dark."

I wasn't any better, myself. All I knew was that *I* hadn't done it, nor had the sailor Pedro, nor Dennis—although not even this last could be proved. Sure, I'd seen brief flickerings of light below, but I wasn't even sure who had come on deck first, or when, and I hadn't even known who was in the first boat until I got into our own.

Very sharp-eyed. I began to wonder if I had a brain or not. I was sure I was overlooking something —something with which all the private eyes and homicide lieutenants and Scotland Yard inspectors in books would have solved the puzzle in five minutes. But not me. I gave up.

Or thought I did. But when Cy came along with his idea, I was right with him—and ashamed I hadn't thought of it myself. When he mentioned it, it stuck out like a sore thumb. "This Huber," he said thoughtfully. "He's gone again, just now. Wonder where he goes all the time, off by himself?"

I shrugged. "Dennis might know. He sees everything."

Dennis was down at the beach and I yelled to him. He came run-

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ning up, but for once he didn't know the answer, either. "I could have followed him," he said defensively, "but you told me not to, remember? Not by myself." Then he looked up eagerly. "But we could do it now, couldn't we—all of us? He just left."

I looked at Cy. He nodded slowly. "Kind of what I had in mind," he said.

But we almost lost Huber. We went fast, but we had to be careful he didn't see us. We caught a glimpse of him on a distant rise in the path. Then we ran to it, just in time to see him leave the path and push off into the heather.

A slight movement of the underbrush showed where he was going, and we followed cautiously. Then he stopped. We wriggled as near as we dared.

The undergrowth had thinned out, and we could watch him. His back was half turned to us, and he was down on his knees, apparently digging with his hands, putting something into the small bag beside him.

"The jewels, I bet!" Dennis whispered in my ear. But why dig them up now? Did he think somebody suspected his hiding place? Did he think the salvage boat was coming any minute to take us off, and did he want to be ready?

Suddenly he stood up, apparently finished. He closed the bag and began striding back the way he come—straight for us.

We couldn't get out of the way in time, and the undergrowth was too sparse to give us real cover. So, before he stepped on us, I moved forward. The other two followed.

Huber stopped as if shot, staring at us. "Childish!" he said coldly.

He made it easier to handle. "Maybe," I said, just as cold. "But there are too many mysteries on this island, Huber. What's in the bag?"

Instinctively, he held it closer. "It is not your business!" he retorted.

Again the lawyer in me agreed, but I was mad now too. "I remember a German saying, Huber, about 'might makes right.' If you don't give it to us, we'll take it." I took a step nearer—and he surrendered.

"Take it!" he said furiously. "But I warn you this is not the end of this matter!"

He threw the bag to the ground. Dennis picked it up like a hawk, opened it, looked in, and then turned to us. "It's just rocks!" he said blankly.

Nothing but rocks, small bits of them, slightly yellowish. But as I picked up one of them I noticed a familiar odor. "Sulphur!" I said.

Huber was breathing heavily. "Yes, sulphur! Now you know!" He fought to get control of himself. Finally an odd look crept into his eyes and when he began talking again, he seemed almost friendly. This was his story:

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He was a mineralogist. He had happened to meet Wilma Wardell in Cannes, had visited her villa, had been shown color photographs of her last year's island cruise. One shot showed Salicudi Island, and as soon as he noticed the yellowish tinge to some of the rocks he remembered two things: first, that sulphur often occurs in volcanic areas; and second, that one of the world's greatest sulphur deposits is in Sicily, only fifty miles away.

He'd immediately wondered if perhaps the same rich formations might exist in neglected Salicudi, too.

She'd been excited. She didn't need more money, although most millionaires seem to want it anyway; but to her it was an adventure, a *coup* to show she was just as smart about business as her late tycoon husband.

She'd suggested he come on the cruise and look over Salicudi himself. If he was right, they would work out a partnership—she putting up the money, he the technical help.

"We had to be very secret about it," he said, watching us carefully. "If anyone else learned of it, even suspected it, we would be lost. We thought we could buy or lease this land for almost nothing. It looks absolutely worthless."

Against my will the story impressed me. It held together too well to be invented on the spur of the moment. It had the ring of truth—but maybe not the whole truth.

"And these," Huber went on, lifting the bag, "are samples I take back for analysis, and as proof." His eyes glinted. "For now, of course, I must find someone else with enough money to finance this."

Cy asked, "So there's really a lot of sulphur here?"

Huber seemed to glow. "Enormous deposits! And sulphur is one of the most valuable of industrial chemicals." He went on softly, "Of course, you three also know the secret now, but perhaps we can arrange something, including all of you. After all, the Wardell estate still exists; its money could still be used for such a wise and splendid investment."

Cy looked at me questioningly. Frankly, I didn't know what to say. It had a vaguely unethical sound to it, but . . .

Then Huber spoiled it by being heavy-handed again. "Of course," he said casually, "if the police learn of this, the secret will be out, and everything will be ruined. And, after all, this had absolutely nothing to do with the criminal happenings."

"The police," I said, "are going to hear anything that bears on the killing."

That ended that. I turned around and headed back to the path, Dennis following me. Then Cy, a little sadly.

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The day dragged by drearily. There seemed nothing to do but wait for the police. I was still on edge, still scared, still watchful. The open beach seemed safe enough. I sprawled there, alone, late in the afternoon, staring out at the reef and going over the same old puzzles again.

Motive, I thought. *Cui bono,* the lawbooks said: Who profits? And the motives seemed to boil down to two. I found myself solemnly drawing a big *A* in the sand for the first one

Murder for the money the jewels would bring. And who needed money? Nearly everybody. The Spanish sailors could live like kings in Spain the rest of their lives on what the jewels would bring, even at cut-rate fence prices. Montgomery needed money. So did Hans Huber, to develop his sulphur find. So did Cy, to buy a new boat. Was De Verrier one of the title-proud purse-poor nobility? The Cannes villa would be a fat haul for him—but suppose he was sure she was going to change that provision in the will? And that applied even to Julie and Anita, if either thought she was going to be cut off with a dollar.

It sounded far-fetched, all of it. Why wait until the wreck to steal the jewels? She had been very careless with them; everybody knew where they were; they could have been stolen at any time during the cruise.

I scrawled a big *B* in the sand for the second motive: murder by somebody who would profit by her death. By somebody who took the jewels merely to make it look like simple robbery. But why bother, with the ship going down?

Still, I began to list them, by initials, in the sand.

H.H. With Wilma Wardell gone, Huber wouldn't have to share his secret with anybody else. We'd stumbled on it, of course, but he could never have foreseen that. But when the *Viking* struck, he hadn't yet been ashore and didn't know how rich the sulphur actually was. Besides, he needed money to develop it—and she'd already agreed to put it up. Or so he said. And would the jewel money be enough to develop Salicudi Island? I doubted it. That would take millions.

C. d.V. The count had his valuable villa back. Maybe, if she'd lived another twenty-four hours, she'd have revoked that bequest. Also, he could have been expecting to marry Anita—a rich, young, pretty wife. Far better than an aging, capricious woman.

A.S. Had Anita's quarrel with her aunt been worse, more serious than she'd said? Had Wilma Wardell told her bluntly she was going to be cut out of the will, because she'd stolen De Verrier away? And how about Anita's quarrel with De Verrier? Was it because each suspected the other of killing

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Wilma Wardell? Or was it Anita's disgust and jealousy because the villa bequest made it all too clear how close a "friend" De Verrier had been to her aunt?

J.L. A lot of the same reasoning applied to Julie Locke, too. Had she found out that her aunt knew who "John" really was? Did she think, even *know,* that her aunt was so furious she would disinherit her? Had she mentioned it to Montgomery, even? Had he helped her out? And himself?

Could either of the girls really have done it? True, they'd lost an aunt, their last close blood family, but somehow I didn't think they'd wear mourning all their lives. She had been domineering, capricious; she had kept them on leashes that were golden, but still leashes.

Now, rich, young, lovely, they could do what they liked. True, they'd probably have inherited eventually anyway—unless she cut them off—but how old would they be then? And at any moment, with one vengeful stroke of her pen, she could have ruined them. I knew her well enough—and so did they—to realize she'd have done it, too, if she were furious enough.

It was even possible, I realized, that one girl had told her aunt about the other, hoping to have her rival cut off, and thus get the whole estate herself.

I stared at my sand scrawlings long and thoughtfully—and hopelessly. I shook my head and was reaching to wipe them out, when I heard footsteps pounding up behind me. My heart jumped. I whirled, cursing myself for being off guard.

But it was only Dennis, with the spear guns. He fell on the sand beside me, looking curiously at my face. "What's the matter?" He grinned. "I scare you?" Then he saw what I'd been drawing in the sand. "Hey, what's that?"

"Nothing," I said—and meant it. I smoothed out the sand.

"How's for some fishing?" he asked. "It ought to be late enough for the big ones to be out by now. Anyway, there's nothing else to do." He was so right.

The wind was strong again, but today it was from the southwest, and our reef was protected. We hunted along it, never very far apart. Not many things are more absorbing than stalking a big fish, and for once my brain was wiped clean of any other thought. I trailed a big gray mullet until he ducked into what he thought was shelter, between two big boulders. But I glided silently overhead and, looking down through a small space between the rocks, saw him almost motionless in the water.

I shot fast and hit him near the tail. He thrashed in panic. My steel arrow caught against the rock, and the trident point pulled out. The mullet flashed by me and into better shelter—a shallow grotto, one of a row of adjoining grottoes.

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I went after him. It was murky inside, but I saw him clearly, with the deep wound in his back. And then, suddenly, he vanished. Not out past me. He just disappeared. The grotto walls looked absolutely solid, but obviously there was some way out that I couldn't see.

I moved on to the next grotto—and there he was again. How he'd got through, I didn't know. He was tiring now, moving sluggishly. I took careful aim, but just before I pulled the trigger a thought struck me so hard, so fantastically, that the gun must have shaken. Anyway, I missed an almost unmissable shot. With his last strength the mullet dated past me and out to the open sea.

But I wasn't thinking of mullet now. My heart was pounding. I crawled out on a rock, took off the mask and flippers, and began to think. Incredible thoughts, but they seemed to fit.

I called Dennis, and we took the dinghy over to where the *Viking* had been lying. I didn't tell him what I'd been thinking, but I explained enough so he could help me.

We began diving. Again and again. And we were lucky . . .

When dinner ended that night, they must have thought I was crazy. I began telling them about the mullet I'd shot. In detail, too. Exactly how he'd gone from one grotto to the next one, although there seemed no passage between.

"It suddenly reminded me of something else," I said slowly. "Of the moment, inside the *Viking*, when I first opened the bathroom door. There were fish there, ahead of me, as long as my hand."

They stared at me blankly. I didn't blame them for not getting it. It had taken me all too long myself.

"Listen," I said carefully. "The floor was tight and solid, except for drain holes no bigger than a pencil. The porthole was screwed down tight. The door was very close-fitting, and locked. *So how did fish that big get in ahead of me?*"

I looked around at their faces, one by one. "There had to be some way in that I didn't know about," I said softly, "and it could be only one thing. The big-sea cock was there, on the drainage pipes, the biggest in the boat. There's no other answer. But there's another question. The sea cock ought to have been closed; but fish couldn't get in if it were closed, so it was open. *Why?*"

I let the question hang in the air a moment, like a sword, and then I answered it.

"Someone opened it," I said. "Someone wrecked us deliberately. He opened the sea cock to make sure she'd sink, even if the real damage wasn't enough. And, unluckily for Wilma Wardell, she came down to let Merlin out—and caught him doing it, red-handed."

Cy stood up slowly, face taut,

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eyes glowing. He was struggling to appear calm. "Fairy tales, Bob," he said softly, "but I don't like them."

I looked straight at him. "We found the other insurance policy, Cy—the big one."

Suddenly he was moving toward the door, near De Verrier. The Frenchman moved almost imperceptibly to stop him, despite Anita's frightened gesture. Then Cy must have remembered where he was—that there was no place to run. He seemed to wilt completely . . .

Finally I had it in black and white, signed *Cyrus H. Townes,* witnessed by the others—a confession valid in any court.

When he broke, he broke completely, told everything, showed where he'd hidden the jewels and my Aqua-lung. But I wasn't sure how long his mood would last; I got it down on paper before he changed his mind.

I glanced through it again. I'd made it short and simple, leaving out all but the main points of his double crime. Murder—and barratry, the willful sinking of a ship for her insurance.

Early this summer I decided to sink my vessel, and took out a $50,000 policy on her with Lloyd's of London . . .

He has been desperate to buy a new boat. Most rich people who charter Mediterranean yachts don't want a sailboat like the *Viking,* slow and relatively cramped. He'd wanted a power yacht—bigger, fancier, faster, more luxurious—that would charter easily, at very high prices.

But this cost a lot of money, and he didn't have it. And he couldn't find a buyer for the *Viking,* either. So he overinsured her, for twice her value, in a new Lloyd's of London policy.

He'd had the $5,000 American policy for years, the one he'd shown me—deliberately shown me, so we'd be convinced he lost by the wreck. Dennis and I, diving at the site where the *Viking* had gone down, had found the Lloyd's policy that had spilled from the opened lockbox. No wonder Cy had told me not to bother to fish those papers up. And, since he was no underwater man, he couldn't get them himself,—and he didn't dare ask anybody else to do it for him.

. . . To wreck her, I chose a spot where land was near and everybody could get ashore safely, but where the water was so deep she could never be salvaged or examined . . .

Salicudi reef had been perfect, and it had been easy for him to make sure we arrived after dark. The weather helped, but if it had been flat calm, he planned to fake engine trouble to delay us long enough. Under my own eyes he had carefully steered her onto the reef, exactly as planned. He had

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never dreamed of murder, or of stealing the jewels, until . . .

. . . After we struck the reef I went below, pulled the main power switch to make things dark, and then opened the main sea cock to make sure she would sink even if the real damage was not enough. While I was in the bathroom doing this, Mrs. Wardell suddenly appeared. Her flashlight caught me. . .

He had not known the cat was in the bathroom until he opened the door, and Merlin sprang out past him. Nor did he dream that any woman, with a ship sinking, would bother about a cat.

When she caught him red-handed, he realized in a flash that if she told what she had seen, he would be in prison for years, perhaps the rest of his life. Barratry is a very serious crime.

He realized she knew enough about boats to understand what he was doing, and that the real damage was on the other side of the boat. In any event, her testimony would make what he had done crystal-clear to investigators.

. . . I jumped up and hit her with the wrench I was using to open the sea cock. Then I put her in the bathroom, locked the door, and threw away the key . . .

He had to do that, for he had no idea how long the ship would still float. And there was a chance somebody else might come down as Lillesden really did to free the cat.

. . . She had dropped her jewel box outside the door when I struck. I opened this box, took the jewels . . .

He had not noticed the key chain she had dropped at the same place.

. . . When I discovered the ship had not sunk to the bottom, I pretended to be highly pleased, and helped to prepare for the salvage work . . .

He *had* to act pleased. Anything else would have looked too odd, too suspicious. He must have cursed his bad luck, and cursed it again when the French yacht happened along with a second Aqua-lung after he had stolen mine, to keep me from going inside the *Viking*.

. . . On the night after the ship broke loose from the rock, I made sure nobody was awake and watching. I rowed out, cut the rope, and left the knife in the dinghy, to throw suspicion on others and cause confusion . . .

—

That was about all of it, and it was enough. The things I'd left out didn't matter.

But one of them still chills me.

He had realized how all-important my own testimony might be, and his suggestion that we trail the German had been only a trick to get me off alone—and shut my mouth forever. But I had innocently called Dennis over, before he could stop me. And with Dennis along, he couldn't do anything.

I thought it over again, and decided I wouldn't call Dennis "the menace" any more.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	HERBERT HARRIS
TITLE:	*Murder — and a Cup of Tea*
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Potts
LOCALE:	Minchcombe, England
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Potts had searched the Number One suspect's bicycle shed without an official warrant— and the MP for Minchcombe East was furious.*

WITH A TWINKLE IN HIS EYE that was faintly malicious, the Sergeant said, "Jim Brady's in there, sir . . . waiting to see you."

Inspector Drew of Scotland Yard's Murder Squad, frowned. "Brady? Who's he?"

"Member of Parliament," the Sergeant said. "Sits for Minchcombe East. A fighting champion of the underdog. Talks about the liberty of the individual and all that."

"I suppose he's griping about something?" Drew prompted.

"It's about Finney, sir. Finney's complained about his bicycle shed being searched while he was out."

The Inspector looked surprised. "Who did it—one of *my* blokes?"

"No, sir. One of ours. Potts. Rather an eager beaver."

"You're telling me," Drew muttered. He was visited by a sudden mental vision of Potts of the Minchcombe force—a very young constable with a very pink face and very ginger hair, the sort of chap old-fashioned detective-story writers used for comic relief. He *would* have a name like Potts, Drew thought.

"Of course, sir," the Sergeant said anxiously, "he'll have to be told that going off on his own and searching a private citizen's bicycle shed without an official warrant is bound to get the local hotheads talking about police persecution."

"Oh, blast," murmured Inspector Drew and went in to face the Member for Minchcombe East.

Brady, stocky, florid, and forth-

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right, jumped up. "Ah, you'd be Inspector Drew? I daresay you know who I am?"

"I've just found out," Drew answered a little crossly.

"Well, it's about this man Finney, the one you chaps have been hounding," Brady said. "He's the son of an ex-mayor, you know. He's entitled to his freedom, like the rest of us."

Brady leaned forward. "I know you Yard chaps have your work cut out and I've no wish to be obstructive, but there's such a thing as the liberty of the individual. This man Finney hasn't been charged with anything . . ."

"I'm hoping he will be," Drew put in.

"He's not been charged with anything," Brady persisted, "and, of course, he's right in saying that policemen have no right to climb over the wall into his garden and rifle his bicycle shed."

"I know nothing about that," Drew answered, "but I'm hoping to find out shortly. May I ask what else you learned from Finney?"

"Nothing that you don't already know, I expect," Brady said. "His uncle, John Marchant, was battered to death in his house at Whitford. And because Finney stood to inherit a good deal of money, he's Number One suspect."

"Correct," the Inspector nodded. "And the day Marchant was murdered, his nephew Finney was away for the whole day—on one of his bicycle jaunts. He left home after breakfast and didn't return until evening."

"But Whitford is fifty miles from Winchcombe," Brady said.

"That's true," Drew replied, "and Finney has been a racing cyclist. He can take such distances in his stride. There is one big snag from my point of view."

"Ah"—Brady allowed himself a smug smile.

"When he started out," Drew said grimly, "he told his landlady he was bound for Liffley, which is entirely the opposite direction from Whitford."

"And he did actually cycle towards Liffley?" Brady prompted.

"Yes, sir, but he could have doubled back and gone to Whitford after all," Drew pointed out. "Our problem is that not a soul has come forward to say they saw Finney that day."

"What about his girl—Verity somebody—who says that Finney visited her at Liffley?" Brady wanted to know.

"Verity!" exploded Drew, and laughed. "In my opinion she's a slut and a liar. Don't forget Finney has come into money from Marchant's death. If you want to believe Marchant was coshed by an intruder, you can. Frankly, I don't."

"You've got to prove Finney was *in* Whitford," Brady said. "He claims he hasn't been near Whitford for years."

The Sergeant pushed his head

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round the door. "Potts is here, sir," he announced. "He'd be obliged if you could see him right away, as he has to go to the assizes to give evidence in an accident case."

"Tell him to come in!" Drew said with a heavy sigh.

Potts entered diffidently, his helmet under one arm, and bobbed his ginger head nervously at the Yard man and the MP.

Drew said, "You know what you've done, don't you? You've got the citizens of Minchcombe calling us Gestapo."

The constable's boyish skin became pinker. "I realize I was a bit hasty, sir, and that I might have cut across what you were doing like. But you weren't available, see. There was this shed door unlocked and Finney nowhere in sight . . ."

"Look," Drew said impatiently, "one of my chaps went over Finney's shed with a toothcomb—and a search warrant, I might add. He also examined the bike. Might I ask what you expected to find that a member of the Murder Squad didn't?"

Potts swallowed. "Well, it's like this, sir. I was struck by an idea, see. It arose out of my missus being partial to a cup of tea, and her brother Ted—who's an analytical chemist—talking about how tea varies according to where you drink it, on account of the water being different from place to place . . ."

Four keen eyes were trained on him. He eased his collar.

"I remembered the bottle of water Finney carried on his bike, and I thought there might be some water left in it and that I ought to get hold of it before he threw it away, see. So I nipped into his shed and got the water bottle—which I see now was the wrong thing to do, sir—but there *was* some water in it, and I got my brother-in-law Ted to test it . . ."

He paused, cleared his throat, and went on, "Ted said there was fluoride in it—I think that's the name, sir—the stuff that certain authorities put in the water to stop people's teeth decaying . . ."

"Well?" snapped the Inspector.

"Ted says there are very few districts in Britain where they've started to put floride in the water supply, sir. I questioned my brother-in-law as to what these districts were, sir, and he stated that the nearest place to here, sir, was Whitford."

"Well, I'm damned!" Drew muttered incredulously, and hurled a look of triumph at MP Brady.

Potts shifted his helmet from one arm to the other. "I'm prepared to accept a reprimand, of course, sir."

"Of course," said the Inspector. But the Member for Minchcombe East didn't see him wink.

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Esther Wagner is the name of a relatively new author—and a name to be reckoned with not only now but, more importantly, in the future. We wish that we had had the honor of "discovering" Mrs. Wagner. But she sent her "first story" to "Atlantic" monthly and it won the Atlantic "First" Award of 1958. Since then Mrs. Wagner's stories have appeared in "The New Yorker," "Harper's," and again in "Atlantic," and at the time of this writing other stories by Mrs. Wagner are scheduled to be published by "Seventeen" and "The Saturday Evening Post." A novel titled ASK THE HARD QUESTION, *written in collaboration with her husband, is due to appear late in 1960; it is an historical novel about the Roman republic and specifically about a great Roman murder trial of the first century B.C. in which Cicero acted as "Perry Mason" for the defense.*

Mrs. Wagner was born in Chicago, educated there and at Bryn Mawr, and also at the Universities of Paris and Poitiers. At present she is teaching English at the College of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington.

The author's original title for the story you are about to read was "Contemporary Gothic"—and that, surprisingly, is all we are going to say of the story itself . . .

MISS WEIRD-O

by ESTHER WAGNER

MICHAEL HARKER HAD HAD AN old-fashioned education and upbringing, of which he was often made to feel ashamed. When his wife died and he moved with his small son David to another town, he was impelled in his loneliness to seek the sort of house and household he had always longed for—with a longing he was now unable to fight. So he bought a huge old house on a lot so large it was almost a park.

The house was one of the last of its kind in the town—indeed in the country, thought Harker—and his mind filled with a savory blend of shame and pleasure whenever he walked through its long halls, glanced into its big rooms and up at its high ceilings, sensed its dark corner, roomy attic, and many-chambered basement.

Harker had never been poor, and was now almost rich. But his adult life had been lived in houses very

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different from this. His wife had liked breakfast nooks, dining areas, bedrooms on the same floor as the living room, half basements, patios. Largeness in a house was for her a matter of windows. Harker's houses had all looked out on the world. The inward-looking, closing-out houses of his boyhood had become identified in his mind with backwardness and unenlightenment.

He hired the most old-fashioned of household help, a plump, kindly woman named Mrs. Poole, who lived on the third floor. Harker, who in his married life had known only cleaning women, cateresses, and baby-sitters, felt guilty about this comfort, too. It was altogether too reminiscent of his mother's and grandmothers' establishments. He felt he was backsliding, and backsliding with a voluptuous sense of sin.

When an opportunity for reparation presented itself, he was only too glad to take advantage of it. He hired a baby-sitter, who had never done anything in her life but baby-sit. Harker felt familiar with her; she was like the help hired by his late wife in that she didn't do very much. But by paying her the small weekly sum which she asked for as "pocket-money," and allowing her to occupy a little basement room, formerly the gardener's apartment, he could tell himself that he was not only helping the girl get a college education but that he was doing an expected thing—hiring a baby-sitter.

Moreover, the girl did not violate the beloved spirit of his house. She seemed much at home amid the non-Philippine mahogany paneling and blue grasspaper of the dining room; she had *wanted* the spooky little basement room, rather than anything upstairs. In some secret way she responded to the old house, and Harker valued this.

The girl was so young that it was hard to imagine her ever, outside real childhood, looking any younger; but then, Harker realized slowly, it was hard to imagine her, outside real middle-age, looking any older either. She was extremely pale, with a kind of luminous pallor which Harker easily recognized as the prevailing fashion in make-up. She was lean and tall, also in the prevailing mode, and so spare that you thought "She's been sick!"—until you remembered how today's models look.

But there was the strange youthful glow of that pale skin, triumphing over livid make-up; the victorious deep red of her lips, the rich red-brown of her eyes, the sheen on her black straight hair, and the careless-power in her swift walk. Harker knew they were all beyond the gift of any cosmetic house or modeling school. She had, too, the glorious confident mindlessness which helped him feel she was the contemporary feature he needed in his household. She knew nothing about

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anything. She could only make peanut butter sandwiches and Instant chocolate milk for David; Mrs. Poole found this unsatisfactory, and insisted on her own menus for the boy.

Harker knew that this was quite standard, and that it was Mrs. Poole who really needed re-education. Yet he had to admit that the sitter made him obscurely uncomfortable. He disliked seeing her bend over David. The long body, the long neck, the long black hair . . . well, Harker knew he was being absurd, and he knew too, guiltily, that he was something his last wife had called "over-read." His mind was haunted by images derived from his book-loving youth and his rather obsessive taste for old books, a taste which he felt was a sign of arrested development. He knew that after college it was expected you would forget all that. But he couldn't. And the girl reminded him of the blood-stained mouths of Borgia legend, of the deadly graces and phosphorescent beauties emanating from the victims and initiates of great Count Dracula.

Harker had always thought these old romances very pleasant, and had even thought warmly of the Count when he bought the old house, and imagined as a visitor to those tall rooms the lord of the dark Castle. But he gradually found these associations unpleasant in connection with the baby-sitter. He avoided the girl; after all, it wasn't *her* fault. She did not get home from college till early evening, and he never saw her leave in the morning. She was easy to avoid.

But one evening she appeared in the front hallway, coming in from a little-used entrance that led to the pantries, just as he was preparing to leave for an evening of work at his office. Nervous as always in her presence, he asked if she had enjoyed her dinner. She stared at him.

"Dinner?" she said. "Oh. That. Well, I haven't had it yet. But I wanted to ask you a favor."

Harker welcomed this.

"I saw this little kiln in your workshop down there," she said in her sweet, small, stupid voice, so thin and silvery for one so tall and striking. "I *like* those things. I had one of my own, but I wrecked it experimenting. It got all burned out and stinky. But if you'd let me use that little one I know I wouldn't wreck it. I see nobody else uses it."

"David doesn't care for it," said Harker quickly. "Please have it."

She gave him her little blank-eyed smile—not really a smile since she never opened her lips for it; she just curved her mouth a bit.

"Thanks," she said, and started to move swiftly away.

"Wait!" said Harker, wanting to show intelligent interest. "Experiments? Are you in science?"

"What?" she asked, drawing her thin brows together. "Oh, science! You mean at college No. I'm in Home Ec."

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"Oh, yes," said Harker. Trapped in his limited academic experience, unable to make the smallest remark about Home Ec, he could only come up with "I guess that's what in my day the girls took in high school and called Domestic Science."

"I guess," she echoed in the sweet blank voice.

"Well," he said, "let Mrs. Poole know if you dream up any revolutionary new foodstuffs," and immediately feared she would take this for sarcasm about her lack of effort in the kitchen. But she smiled the almost-smile again, blinked in the hall light, and vanished soundlessly through her door.

She was beginning to bother him. He even thought about her at the office. Was it a sign of his general out-of-touchness and old-fashionedness that he felt so odd about this very unsingular girl? Or *was* there something fishy about her?

He had a good friend in the town, a social worker who had been a college friend of his wife's. Hilda Grose had done a lot of work among "difficult" young people. Harker called her up, and was soon comfortably settled in her little apartment, confiding in her while he swirled and rattled ice in his fat glass.

"Well, did you check?" said Miss Grose in her most commonsensical way, sounding exactly like his wife when she had been faced with a domestic problem: bored, but ready to come to grips. "References?"

"Of course I called the college. They said she was okay; never been a resident there, but she gets some money from a relative abroad—sort of Continental background. But she was born in this country, and makes the rest with these part-time jobs. Grades okay. Really no trouble of any sort."

"Well, Mike!" said Miss Grose. "Anyway, it's nice you stopped by." She grinned at him in friendly scorn. Then she felt sorry.

"Look," she said, "can't you be a little more down-to-earth about what bothers you with the girl? All you've told me is that there's no boy friend trouble, no klepto trouble, no noise trouble, no trouble with David you can put your finger on. She looks weird—what girl doesn't, if she goes in for the business, the clothes and posture and hair and make-up now? What exactly—"

"Well," he said, shamefaced but stubborn, "why does a girl like that *want* to live in our house? You saw it before I bought it and *you* thought I was crazy. Remember the basement, that little gardener's room? That's the room she wanted! And *she* came to me for the job, you know. What if she lets somebody through one of those basement doors? What if she goes out and stays all night and I don't know anything about it? What if she's *hiding* somebody down there?"

"Oh, Lord! You've been watching too many midnight television

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shows. But look: why don't you just get rid of her?"

"I can't do that!" Harker meant it.

"Okay, okay! So if anything happens—I mean really happens—call me. You wonder if there's something funny about the kid; brother, with the ones I see every day, you wouldn't have to do any wondering. Betcha one thing: your little Miss Weird-O isn't going to have any surprises for *this* old girl."

Harker lost a dog, and a neighbor lost a dog. David had some bad nightmares, about which he was very close-mouthed. Mrs. Poole complained just a bit about a smell coming up through the registers. Harker found a dead cat in the garbage can.

On an obscure impulse, wishing to "check" once more, he called up the college again. The Dean of Women allowed him to perceive that she was used to these vague, troublesome calls from fussy people who didn't quite know what they were calling about. He tried hard to expel the question of the sitter from his conscious mind. Then once he saw her gliding down the main staircase, looking incredibly vital and dead-pale. He spoke quite sharply to her.

"Miss Graves!" he said. She did indeed look gravely at him as she came down.

"Aren't you going anywhere? I, uh, I rather thought someone your age would be going—do you have friends at the college?" He felt, like an object inside his ears, the heavy weight of his own mean inquisitiveness.

"Why, sure," she told him calmly. "I'm going to a dance right now."

"The dress is very nice," said Harker lamely, and indeed it was a striking affair of black silk, with a broad band of red going diagonally across the front like some knightly order. Perhaps *nice* wasn't the word, but . . .

"Thank you, Mr. Harker," said the Graves girl demurely, and passed him.

Harker read late that night, determined to gather a few facts, make some concrete observations, rid his mind. He left enough doors open, including the door to the basement stairs, so that he could keep reasonable track. She came in fairly late, but not very; she did come in from the garden, though—through one of the basement doors to which he had not known she had a key.

Suddenly he heard a wild scream from the upper floor. David cried with his nightmares, but this scream was new. Yet, with a curious steady impulse, Harker went not upstairs but down. As he ran to the basement he heard Mrs. Poole pattering along the upper hall to David's room.

Miss Graves was not in her little bedroom. The door was open; he could see her chenille bedspread, her writing table with the kiln in

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the middle of it, a bunch of shiny glass jars; but she was in the little basement bathroom just down the passageway.

To Harker's stark amazement he found himself pounding on the bathroom door. He heard an ordinary splashing from within, of faucet water running in a basin, but there was no answer to his knock. He ground his teeth, swore, thrust open the unlocked door.

Miss Graves was bent over, brushing her teeth. She straightened and reached with a darting gesture for a towel, which she applied immediately to her face. Harker stared. She buried her face in the towel, wiped and blotted. When she raised her head to look at him, her red-brown eyes were more red than brown.

Had he made her cry? But he stared in gaping horror at the reddening towel with which she had wiped away the pink froth he had seen all over her mouth; at the stained toothbrush still in her other hand, at the thin streak and blotches of red on the washstand, escaped from the water's cleansing tide.

Miss Graves herself had to break the silence.

"What is it?" she asked, and turned away to put up her toothbrush, wipe the basin top, and turn off the water. Harker was still speechless. When she turned back to him, her mouth dropped at its soft curling corners and her face was full of a strange, dark woe.

"Mr. Harker!" she said, her thin little voice rising. Harker gesticulated toward the towel.

"I *know*," she said mournfully, and her head hung. "It's terrible. It's always been so *terrible*, ever since I was a kid! Nobody can do anything about it, no matter what the ads say, Mr. Harker, I've just *got* pink toothbrush, sensitive gums. They bleed and bleed. I wish you —" Her voice trailed away.

Harker felt with a cruel, glad pang of self-castigation that he had done an enormous thing. He knew how these minor defects could damage a girl's idea of herself, break her confidence, haunt her with humiliation.

"These things go away," he muttered awkwardly. "I'm terribly sorry . . . shouldn't, wouldn't ever crash in like this, but I had to ask you about David. We're having trouble with him. I couldn't make you hear—" And he felt himself blushing, heard himself stammering.

"The nightmares?" she spoke again in her small crystal voice. "I heard him yell, down the register. I went in there once when he woke up and he nearly had a fit yelling. Mrs. Poole said I'd better not go in to him again. Didn't she tell you?"

"Well, I thought you—do you know about any stories he's heard, programs he's seen—anything that could be behind this?"

She shook her head. Harker

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backed away, muttering his apologies. But as he turned, he tensed up again, for there in the basement passageway, bare feet on his linoleum, stood a girl he had never seen, wearing a flannel bathrobe. He shouted at her, "Who are *you?*" taken aback, outraged by her pale thick-skinned thick-featured face, her stolid expression. Miss Graves moved quickly to his side. The stranger was silent.

"Oh, that's Celia," said Miss Graves. "Celia Graves. My cousin. She's at the college too. I thought you wouldn't mind, Mr. Harker. She was at the party with me. I know I should have asked, but it was so late, I didn't think you'd—" The other pale girl gave nothing but a numb half-smile.

"It's all right," said Harker confusedly. He brushed past and went up to David and Mrs. Poole.

But the next day he called up Miss Grose and made a date with her for dinner.

"Well, something *did* happen."

"You mean the kid's got pyorrhea?" said Hilda Grose. Harker enjoyed her smile; he'd not seen a real smile for some time.

"I only told you that because I thought the laugh on me was coming to you. I mean the other girl. This Celia. So I was right, there's been somebody else in and out. She looks queer, too, queerer than my Miss Graves, if you want to know."

"How could that *be?*"

"Okay! I called up the college. That damned dean. She tells me there's no other Graves at the college—just mine, Cynthia Graves. So mine was lying."

Miss Grose had to admit she was getting interested.

"All right, Mike," she said. "Funny family goings-on somewhere—it's usually that. Look: send your Cynthia over to me tomorrow afternoon on some errand. I can talk to these kids. I'll bet you another dinner I can tell you a lot about this Celia after I'm through."

When he got home that night he had no trouble finding Miss Graves. She was in the kitchen, boiling water. Harker asked what she was making.

"Instant," she said tranquilly.

"Did Mrs. Poole order it for you?" he asked in a fussy, hosty tone. Mrs. Poole never served it and had always seemed to him completely ignorant of the product. He had not missed it.

"What? Oh! No, I don't drink coffee. I make this other stuff, sort of soup, like, in that kiln you gave me. I just come up for the water."

He told her of the favor he wished to ask her. When she heard of the call on Miss Grose, a little wary look crossed her face.

"What time?"

"Late afternoon. I know you have some late classes. Just go when you can." She nodded. Apparently the wary look had come simply from

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the thought of having to alter her schedule. Harker, a man of schedules not lightly rearranged, felt this reassuring.

"What'd I tell you?" said Miss Grose over the dinner he had to buy her the next day. "It's usually family. That poor kid! Both of them come from broken homes. Cynthia feels more like a sister than a cousin to Celia. Looks out for her. Gets her invited to college parties; pretends she's a student, but she works somewhere downtown. Only relative they have is some terrible old uncle in some weird part of Europe. He sends Cynthia a little money every year, but ignores Celia. Cynthia helps Celia, and it's clear they're sort of mutually dependent. The lie was just a reflex. Ignore the whole thing, Mike! Those kids have had tough times. Let her have Celia there whenever she wants! What skin is it off you? Don't give her reason to lie and evade, then the lies and evasions stop. Rudiments! Come on, I'll buy you a drink at home and play you some new records. You'll still get home early.

"That kid loves your house, Mike. You've done a good thing for her. They can't ever come out with their gratitude, but *I'm* grateful to you, Mike, on the kid's account." He responded warmly to her kind smile.

But he didn't get home early, after all. Mrs. Poole called him at Miss Grose's to tell him that a terrible thing had happened and the house was full of police. A police officer spoke to him and told him a girl's body had turned up in his alley. The officer didn't want to ask the housekeeper to take a look; she was too old. Shock. A neighbor had found the body. The police ambulance was there; would he meet them at the morgue?

Hilda Grose went with him, for she honestly feared that he was going to have an attack of some sort. Remorse and terror drained the blood from Harker's ruddy face. Knowing him, she was sure he'd find some way to blame himself.

In the car he began to mutter.

"Poor kid, poor kid! You just don't *know,* Hilda! You don't know how I . . . Why, I used to *amuse* myself, pretending that what I saw about her was that she was a vampire or werewolf or something! Why, I used to sit there for hours handing myself a laugh, thinking the Instant she brewed for herself was instant blood, that her sort didn't need to suck any more because of modern science . . . glass jars . . . cats and dogs, raw blood for the Instant . . . Why, I used to think, well, she can't really be a vampire—she goes to classes all day and everybody knows they can't get around by day . . . The *dean* knows her, she's there all day . . . So I'd hand myself a laugh: I'd think, well, she's the new type vampire; she's not interested in David anyway, more interested in just staying in the house, wouldn't risk her place . . . after all, they have

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their housing problems; they've learned to adapt . . . Then I'd laugh, I'd *laugh* . . . that poor kid, with her broken-home background and her pink toothbrush . . . and me, *laughing!*"

Miss Grose was at a loss. She couldn't even believe he had laughed as he said he had; he was too emotional now. Somehow she realized that she was, after all, surprised. She really hadn't known that Michael was like this.

She stuck with him when they went in for the identification, for she was now seriously worried about Harker's condition. She had gathered that something pretty gruesome was involved. But when the sheet was pulled down, neither she nor Harker even shrank from the sight of torn throat and lacerated young shoulders; they were too stunned by the face, unmarked, pale, drained in death.

"That's not her!" said Miss Grose.

"No," said Harker, who had only half his voice, and whose face was drained too. "It's Celia."

The officer was considerate. He took in without effort the shift in the case. He assured Harker an alarm would be sent out. He didn't dare be too encouraging, he said, but after all, there was not even any indication that the dead girl had been with her cousin at the time of the happening. It was possible Cynthia was perfectly safe somewhere.

"We've got to get back to the house," said Harker, dry-lipped.

"I left a patrolman there, Mr. Harker," said the officer.

"Hilda," said Harker hoarsely.

"Of course I'll come with you, Michael," she said.

She was unable to control her sudden fascination with Harker's unsuspectedly complex mental processes. Alone in his car with him, she started to probe.

"Now Mike! This sort of thing does happen. There's been some rise lately in our figures on juvenile delinquency in this supposedly wholesome town. This case will turn out to be one of those statistics. Though I must say I prefer, like you, the Teenage Vampire stuff."

Harker said nothing.

"Just to pass the time, tell me how you'd have fitted this development in with your private joke."

Harker shot her a look, dull-eyed, obscurely panicky.

"The girl Celia wouldn't be her cousin at all," he muttered, "just some poor, near-half-wit she picked up. Too dumb. But not too dumb to go to college, of course, enroll, sit there, take care of there being someone there who was thought of as Cynthia Graves. The dean's going to say I'm wrong and it *is* Cynthia Graves, and you and I and Mrs. Poole are going to have to say different. That girl kept mine from having to go out by day. Also she was a sort of, uh, reservoir . . ."

Miss Grose giggled helplessly.

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"*What* an imagination, Mike! But if she used cats and dogs for her Instant, why did she need Celia?"

"You can't live on Instant alone," said Harker in a deep sad voice. Miss Grose felt really quite excited. There was certainly more to Michael's case than she'd ever suspected. His wife Helen had always told her he had been insecure as a child, living in those large old-fashioned households full of servants and shifting generation-patterns. And all that reading . . . well, everybody knew how that studious type of boy is likely to turn out. His instability had been settled for a while by marriage to Helen; but Helen's death had knocked out more props than he had realized, and now . . .

"Hilda," he said. "I'd better tell you something. After this, even if the girl comes back, I can't have her in the house."

"Of course," she soothed him, though she privately thought that Michael would never get anywhere that way, always evading, always refusing to face up to things.

"I can help you, Mike. I'm a wheel, after all, at the Home, you know, the hostel for young people from broken homes. It's a good place, comfortable, lots of group activities, expert counseling."

"If she comes tonight, will you take her to this Home right away?"

"Of *course,* Mike."

The policeman met them at the door. No Miss Graves, nor any word. Mrs. Poole had taken David to bed, and was sleeping in the little boy's room.

"Hilda," said Harker, "would you do something for me? I'm going to sit up tonight. Don't argue, please! I want you to take David back with you. He's fond of you. I'd feel more comfortable if he were with you until we get this thing more nearly cleared up. Let me go up now and get him and drive you both back. I'll come for him in the morning before you have to leave."

Miss Grose was quite pleased to do this, for she liked David and got on well with him.

Harker went up to get his son from the bedroom. He found the boy's small nightlight on, as always since the nightmares. He could see the orderly features of the old housekeeper, relaxed in deep sleep, her breath coming evenly, her hair neatly confined in a fine gray net, a net which suddenly moved Harker, for it reminded him of others he had seen, made of real hair, in the days before synthetics. He determined not to wake Mrs. Poole, to let her have her slumber unbroken for once. He lifted the sleeping boy from his cot.

David barely woke at all and was installed at Miss Grose's with a minimum of fuss. Harker drove back slowly.

On the second floor of his house he heard a slight stirring, and moved toward the door of David's room, feeling that since Mrs. Poole

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had been waked up after all, she must be informed of David's absence. The room was dark, though. As he walked down the hall toward it, there suddenly appeared in the doorway the tall beautiful form of Miss Cynthia Graves.

Harker banished from his mind, with discipline, every morbid thought that was there.

"There you are," he said. "You've heard about your cousin. But I have some good news for you." He drew closer to her, looking past her at the door-paneling, the wallpaper, anything but at her face. "I've made a much better arrangement for you. Miss Grose whom you met this afternoon is going to get you into the young people's home where she does much of her work. This will be better for you, now that your cousin is gone."

"Celia's not gone."

"She's dead, Miss Graves."

"I know. But she'll be around. Death is a prelude."

Harker was moved by this most unexpected revelation of Miss Grave's calm faith. Still, his regressive self was stubborn.

"Miss Grose will be coming for you in the morning."

"The morning," said Miss Graves quietly. "I'll have to get ready. And I'll need some more."

"Mrs. Poole—" began Harker, without paying attention to this last remark. But he fell silent, looking past Miss Graves into the dark room, and seeing in the pale hall-light a large dark pool on the floor.

He shifted his gaze, slowly bringing his eyes to rest at last on the face of the baby-sitter.

His whole being was invaded ruthlessly by a sudden deep sensuous delight in the girl's astonishing beauty. Her thin lids drooped over her eyes as she swayed in the doorway.

Harker's eyes passed over her body, and a forgotten heat spread slowly through him.

"You killed her," said part of him.

"I *had* to have more," the thin silvery voice assured him. "Please. I had to."

He put his hands on her shoulders.

"Mr. Harker! I'm sick. I didn't tell Miss Grose everything. After our home broke up, my mother —she was so sick, Mr. Harker." The light voice deepened and went on, rhythmically, in a slow and lyrical incantation. "Her mind was sick, her mind and mine, so sick, so very, very, very . . ."

Harker crushed her to him, just as they say in the old novels. He closed his eyes, so did not see the long-fanged gleaming smile, full and wide for the first time since he had known Miss Graves. But he knew, for he saw it in his mind's eye; knew it in his secret, educated heart; and in a great swoon of voluptuous awareness he surrendered, made ready in the last bone of his body and the last recess of his spirit for the piercing, ultimate kiss.

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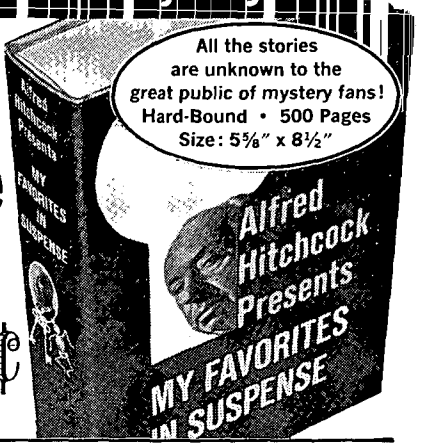
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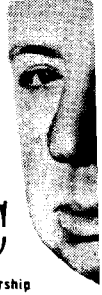

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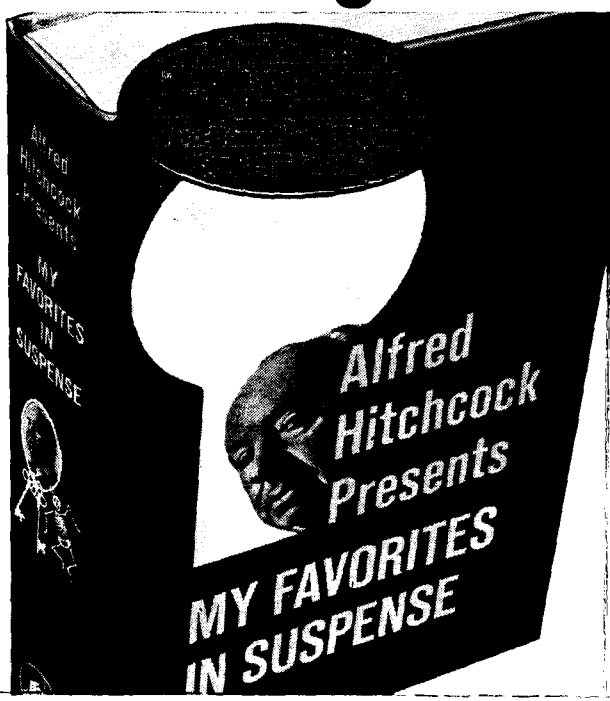

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